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ROMEO AND THE REDS OR THE BELEAGUERED RANCH

BY
BUCKSKIN SAM.

CHAPTER I.

A SKELETON AT THE FEAST.

BANCROFT RANCH, situated in a bend of the Rio Medina, five miles east of the Bandera Hills and twenty miles west of Castroville—the latter a mere collection of ranches a quarter of a century ago—was owned by Benjamin Bancroft, a true type of the old Southern gentleman of his day.

He was also the owner of quite a large stock of cattle, horses, mules, and sheep, these last being herded by Mexicans in the Bandera Hills, who camped the greater portion of the time with the flocks.

There were six cowboys, Marker Mose being the chief, and three *vaqueros*, whose principal duty it was to look after the horses and mules.

Old Ben Bancroft, as the ranchero was called, was the father of two children, of whom he was justly proud. The son, William, had come to be known as "Bandera Bill" from his frequenting those hills for the purpose of hunting; and Bertie, the daughter, was a golden-haired beauty, and the belle of the Rio Medina.

Bandera Bill was, at the time of which we write, twenty-two years of age, and his sister but little more than sweet sixteen.

Both Bertie and Bill had been at Bancroft

THEN DOWN SHOT THE NEGRO LAD LIKE A PROJECTILE FROM A CATAPULT.

Ranch just one year at the date to which we refer, their father having established himself at the bend for that time, previous to sending for his children, who had been at school in San Antonio.

The old ranchero was a widower.

Young Bill Bancroft had roamed the country around for twelve months when our story opens, and the fair Bertie had explored the bottom-timber for miles up and down the river from the bend, and galloped frequently over the prairies upon "Colorado," her favorite mustang. She was also fond of fishing, and had a pet spot some distance up the stream from her home, and which was destined to be the scene of her first serious adventure on the borders.

As, for a year past, the maiden had ridden at will in every direction, without encountering any danger or ought to frighten her, this event was all the more startling and terrible to her.

Bandera Bill had been in the habit of encamping in the hills, for days and nights at a time; and in this way he had made the acquaintance of three persons who were destined to become leading characters in the tragic drama which was fated to be played at the ranch and in its vicinity.

Two of these were Chiota, a friendly Creek chief, and his squaw, Dancing Fawn, the latter one of a thousand among her people, being not only handsome, but graceful as the animal after which she was named. Chiota was a superb specimen of physical manhood—a veritable prince of the prairies.

He lived only for revenge upon the Apaches, who had slain and scalped his father and mother, and stolen all their horses.

He was generally attired in buckskin leggings, highly ornamented, and wore fringed moccasins; but his arms and body from the belt up were naked. He carried bow and quiver, as also a carbine and Colt's revolver, which latter arms had been presented to him by the rangers, for his services as scout and guide.

Dancing Fawn dressed with a natural taste for ornamentation that was remarkable.

Neither the chief nor his squaw had ever visited Bancroft Ranch—the home of their "white brother," as they termed Bandera Bill.

The other friend and pard, whom Bill had secured, and whom he had learned to esteem highly, was Frank Forbes, whose father's ranch was on the Rio Frio, and who hence bore the sobriquet of "Frio Frank." Like Chiota and Dancing Fawn, Frank had never yet visited his friend's home on the Rio Medina.

Frio Frank had a father, mother, and sister, and he was as much like Bandera Bill in build, age, and dress, as could well be imagined. His face and form were well-nigh perfect. The two friends were likewise of about the same age.

Chiota and his squaw had agreed to visit the ranch and meet Bill. The latter, in the mean time, had met his pard, Frank, and had induced him to accompany him to the Medina, Frank being well acquainted with the Creeks, who were then on their way to Bancroft Ranch.

Frio Frank had heard great reports of the beauty of his friend's sister, but had always excused himself in some way from visiting the ranch. Bill, in like manner, had never been at Frank's home, on the Rio Frio.

On their way to the Medina, in passing through a defile the Bandera Hills, a horde of Apaches, under the leadership of that terrible scourge of the border, Lone Wolf, dashed into both entrances of the passage, thus "corralling" the young Texans. They made a brave stand, and killed a number of the Indians; but were captured, and taken on down the Rio Medina to the neighborhood of Bill's home, near which no hostile Indian had been seen since Ben Bancroft located the ranch. Lone Wolf had mapped out a new war-trail, and was reserving his two captives for torture.

Meanwhile, Chiota and his squaw, also arrived in the vicinity of Bancroft Ranch, unaware that the war-party was encamped so near them.

The Creeks had halted in a small "open," when a shriek from the river caused the chief to hurry to that point. He arrived just in time to shoot with his bow and arrow the head of a huge moccasin snake that lay coiled in the mud, ready to spring upon Bertie Bancroft. Just then a signal from Dancing Fawn forced him to rush back to her assistance; but the young squaw had fired twice with a revolver before he reached the "open," and Chiota found an Apache dying, who had lost his life in an attempt to capture Dancing Fawn.

Again was Chiota summoned back to the river by another cry. Bertie had crawled up the bank, after he had shot the snake, and had

fainted; but had revived, only to find herself confronted by a monster black bear.

Once more did the chief save the maiden's life by slaying the fierce beast.

Dancing Fawn soon arrived upon the scene, and Chiota, not wishing Bertie to see the dead Apache, led his horse and that of his squaw to the river-bank, and directed the females to ride at once to the ranch—he believing that a war-party was near.

After they had gone, the chief succeeded in slaying two more Apache spies; and, finding six equipped mustangs in a thicket, he knew that three other spies were still down the river. But he was confident that Dancing Fawn could protect herself and Bertie. He, therefore, decided to follow the back trail of the red riders; thus gaining a knowledge of the war-party.

Chiota succeeded, but, to his great anguish and concern, he discovered, tied to trees, in a narrow belt, at the west of the Apache camp, none others than Bandera Bill and Frio Frank. He recognizes Lone Wolf, and sees that three-score and more braves form the war-party.

He contrives, while the Apaches are busily devouring horse-meat, to release the two young Texans. He, then, proceeded stealthily to the opposite side of the camp, amid the undergrowth, and stabbed one of the Apache guards, allowing him to give the death-bowl.

The mustangs were staked between this slain guard and the feasting braves, and the latter all rushed through the midst of the animals to the point of alarm.

Our three friends bounded upon their horses, and at once opened a fusillade from their revolvers. Soon eight Apaches lay dead, and the remainder rush amid the mustangs, which are stampeded by Chiota and the Texans. This left the war-party on foot, and therefore comparatively helpless.

The three pards proceeded slowly down along the bank of the river, Frank riding in the rear.

The run of the narrative now calls us to follow the three Apache spies, who had escaped the notice of the Creek and the squaw.

These survivors of the half-dozen braves, sent down the river to ascertain the location of the "log-lodge," which was supposed by Lone Wolf to be not far distant, from there being cattle and horses on the plain—these spies heard the revolver-shots, when Dancing Fawn dispatched the Apache; but, supposing the shots to have been made by some white hunter, two of them secreted themselves in the branches of a tree, over a cow-path that ran parallel with the river, and with coiled lassoes awaited their opportunity to capture a victim for the torture.

The other red spy reached the bend, and from the branches of a tree gazed upon the ranch, just as old Ben Bancroft walked to the end of the veranda, worried at the continued absence of his daughter. The ranchero perceived the painted face, ran for his rifle, and darted toward the tree.

The Indian had fled, and like a madman the old ranchero rushed up the river, to the favorite haunt of his daughter; where, to his horror, he came upon the two scalped Apache corpses, which had been placed by Chiota with the carcass of the monster bear.

Ben Bancroft no longer doubted that his darling had been captured, and he fell senseless.

In the mean time, the two Apaches in the tree, in place of the white hunter they expected, saw Bertie and Dancing Fawn, who were on their way to the ranch. Then they lassoed, bound, and gagged; and then, mounting behind them, the savages proceeded, near the margin of the timber, toward the plain.

There, they were joined by their comrade spy, who had discovered the ranch.

Then, the trio of red fiends hastened toward their camp, with their female captives.

Frio Frank, as has been said, rode in the rear of Chiota and Bandera Bill; but he lagged behind, very providentially, and far off in the undergrowth caught the glimmer of golden hair, and the flaunting of a feather above the bushes.

He knew that the sister of his friend had hair of that color, and instantly the idea struck him that Bertie Bancroft had been captured; and without a word with his pards, he started toward the point where he had made his startling discovery.

He waited until convinced. There, secreted in the bushes, he recognized Dancing Fawn, and with her the most angelic being he had ever beheld—both captives to three hideous Apaches!

He knew that if he succeeded in killing but one, the others would stab the captives.

Nerving himself, Frank made a grand dash, "picking" triggers lively, killing all three of the braves, and rescuing the females—Bertie

Bancroft and her handsome, daring and skillful rescuer falling in love at first sight.

Frio Frank, the happiest man on earth, then turned about with the females, and proceeded toward the ranch.

Meanwhile Chiota and Bill missed their pard, but concluded that he had struck a trail and could take care of himself. So onward they went to the clear space, where the chief showed Bill the slain Apaches and the bear. But there, to the great amazement and grief of both, they discovered the senseless form of the old ranchero.

They were then suspicious that Bertie and Dancing Fawn had been captured by the three remaining spies, of whose presence Chiota had informed Bandera Bill.

They revived the old man, who was arguished to the very borders of insanity, and then all went at once to the ranch, only to find their worst fears realized.

Bertie and Dancing Fawn had not arrived, and of course had been captured.

The cowboys were signaled from the plain, and preparations at once made to go to the rescue of the maiden and the young squaw.

The report made by Bill and Chiota that the war-party was encamped near caused the greatest apprehension; but just as our friends were all ready to start, who should ride up but Bertie, escorted by Frio Frank, with Dancing Fawn by their side!

Bertie sat upon her own mustang, Colorado, which they had found in the bottom-timber.

Great was the relief and joy of the old ranchero, as well as of Bandera Bill and the Creek chief.

Frio Frank was the hero of the hour; and, after preparing the ranch for defense and corralling the horses, all seated themselves to a feast that had been gotten up by the old cook, Auntie Sue.

The latter, with her son Romeo, and Chunk, the ugly and diminutive dog of the latter, came in for their share of attention, in the second number of this series, which details the dread occurrences of the night following that eventful day, the events of which we have just given in brief.

CHAPTER II.

FRESH FEARS ON THE FRIO.

THE people of Bancroft Ranch, and their newly arrived friends congratulated themselves upon their miraculous escapes.

Every preparation was now made for the defense of the ranch, and as time passed, all became more anxious; although, from his heavy losses, it appeared reasonable to suppose that Lone Wolf would return, westward, to his village.

Chiota, however, together with Bill and Frank, were not so confident of this; but they did not wish to alarm Bertie, by expressing their apprehension.

The chief, with the old ranchero and his son, had gone to the end of the veranda; Chiota wishing to learn the location of the spot where the Apache spy had been seen within the foliage. Just as the finger of Ben Bancroft pointed to the place, the paint-daubed face of another spy appeared as before!

Instantly the carbine of the Creek sprung to his shoulder, and the Indian sprung free of the branches, and fell, with a death-howl bursting from his lips.

The chief then scalped his victim.

No longer did the Texans believe themselves safe from attack.

Chiota rushed into the shades of the bottom-timber, to ascertain if more Apaches were lurking there.

A consultation between the old ranchero, his son, Frio Frank, and Marker Mose, resulted in a decision to at once dispatch Romeo, the little negro, to Castroville, for assistance.

The lad was found, hidden with his mother and his dog Chunk, beneath the couch of Bertie; the negroes being terrified nearly to death. Speechless with terror, Romeo was bound upon a mustang, with his dog Chunk before him, to the great grief of Auntie Sue. Thus he was started, for help, to Castroville.

But, in place of turning in that direction, the mustang, which proved to be one that Chiota had taken from the Apaches when he rescued Bill and Frank, headed west, toward the encampment of the Apache war-party!

The Texans were astounded, but it would have been impossible to overtake the boy before he reached a point where his would-be preserver stood in danger of capture also.

Then it was, that the thought of a new and probable danger, struck Frio Frank. This was that

the Apaches would shoot fire arrows upon the roof, force the defenders to abandon the dwelling, and then massacre them.

No longer were the females considered safe.

Frank's suggestion now was, that they be secreted in the branches of a tree, where he believed they would be safe from discovery.

This plan was immediately adopted, and the two young men conducted Bertie, with Dancing Fawn and Auntie Sue, to a huge vine-and-moss-draped tree; where, high up, they constructed a comfortable perch, or "nest" for them, with a net-work of lariats.

Impressing upon them the necessity of remaining perfectly quiet, and assuring them they would be safe, the young Texans returned to the defense of the ranch.

The three Mexican *vaqueros* were, with two of the cowboys, stationed in trees, above the corrals in which were the horses and mules. This left one man to guard each side of the two apartments of the ranch, including the open space between them.

One cowboy, upon his horse, was stationed at the entrance of the bend.

Chiota's absence occasioned concern to all, but, as will be seen, he was well occupied.

Two, of four braves who had set out from the Apache war-camp in pursuit of Frank and Bill after their rescue by Chiota, happened to strike the cow-path that had been so recently traversed by our three friends; but neither of them was aware of the presence of the other.

In the same manner, the other two chanced upon the trail of the mounted spies who had been slain; neither knowing of the other being near.

The leading brave of each pair reached the border of the narrow space, where the two corpses reclined upon the carcass of the bear. Just before reaching it, however, each heard the rustle of the bushes behind him, and rushed headlong forward as soon as the open space was perceived. There it was twilight, while in the undergrowth it was dark.

The two trails entered the "open" at points not three feet apart; consequently, the first pair, White Owl and Beaver Tail rushed into each other's arms. Each, in his astonishment and alarm, believed the other to be an enemy. They, at once, clutched, rolling over the bank of the river into the soft black mud, and directly upon the huge headless moccasin snake, which was yet living.

Feeling the reptile squirming beneath them, both struggled apart, when they recognized each other. Completely covered with the black mud, they scrambled up to the bank together.

At the same time, the two rear braves rushed, in much the same manner, into each other's arms, and fought desperately; but, suddenly, they beheld the others, looking like nothing they had ever before seen—the black mud everywhere clinging to them.

Both these braves, Swift Foot and Black Buzzard, thought they now looked upon the Bad Spirits of their traditions, and bounded into the undergrowth, as if the fiends were after them. While there secreted, they beheld little Romeo, upon the mustang, speeding toward their camp.

White Owl and Beaver Tail were relieved and rejoiced at having frightened Swift Foot and Black Buzzard, as they would have been disgraced, had they been recognized. They hastened to a point where they could bathe, and then to the border of the timber above the plain, where there was sufficient light to renew their war-paint, and start out afresh.

Chiota, meanwhile, was in the timber, on the lookout for spies, after shooting Red Elk from the tree near Bancroft Ranch. The second party of spies sent down, of whom Red Elk was one, recovered their slain comrades and the mustang; but, in their search, encountered not the four young braves.

On their way toward the ranch, Swift Foot was slain by Chiota, and Black Buzzard captured, and sewed up in the skin of the black bear; the scalp of Swift Foot, and the headless moccasin snake being used as appendages—thus making up a most fearful-looking object.

Then Chiota went to the bend, forcing the disguised Indian before him. Having secured him in a thicket, the chief returned to ascertain if there were any more Apaches in the timber.

White Owl and Beaver Tail discovered the ranch, and also the hiding-place of the women.

They succeeded in capturing Bertie and Dancing Fawn, and knocked poor Auntie Sue senseless; leaving the old woman thus, as they did not wish to be incumbered by her. Then they were undecided which way to flee.

Auntie Sue partially recovered, and crawled to the dwelling, betraying the fact of the cap-

ture. The old ranchero fell senseless. Frank, Bill, and Chiota rushed to the rescue. In the mean time, the two braves had detached a couple of logs from a mass of driftwood, and were floating, with their captives, down the river.

During this time, Romeo had dashed into the Apache camp; but, previously, the burial of the braves, the war-dance, and the bringing of the scalped victims of Chiota, occupied the time of the Apaches.

They then forced the little negro to guide them to the ranch.

His dread terror vanished, at the thought of the danger of his mother and friends, and he resolved to lead the war-party past the bend; trusting that, as the entrance was narrow, it would not be observed by them.

This heroic determination he carried out, but a brave perceived the ranch when nearly past it, and Lone Wolf tomahawked Romeo. He was borne away, clinging to his saddle, Chunk still accompanying him, the blade of the hatchet having struck sideways, thus rendering the black boy unconscious.

Then, in a wild charge, the Apaches dashed toward Bancroft Ranch.

Frio Frank, unable to find any trace of Bertie, rushed madly down the river, insanely anxious on her account.

Chiota, with some assistance, placed Black Buzzard, in his awful masquerade, upon the veranda roof, and suspended the corpse of Red Elk in front of the open space in the middle of the dwelling.

With terrible whoops of war, the Apaches charged down from the plain into the entrance of the bend; when a terrific volley from the house, followed close after by another from the timber, mowed the paint-daubed demons down.

At the same moment, Black Buzzard, in the bearskin, bounded from the roof, and rolled over and over; but, gaining his feet, he staggered toward the already demoralized Indians, stumbling over dead and dying!

In superstitious terror, the survivors, some twenty-five in number, leaving fifteen behind them, lashed their mustangs into the dark shades, and disappeared; fully convinced that "bad medicine" had been scattered along the Rio Medina.

Chiota had cut away some of the skin of the bear, to enable Black Buzzard to see his comrades when they charged upon the ranch; but he left the spy, gagged as before.

White Owl and Beaver Tail, with Bertie and Dancing Fawn, floated down the river; the logs drifting apart some yards.

From being in the water, the buckskin bonds about the young squaw's wrists became stretched, and she succeeded in freeing herself; but was forced still to maintain the same position as when bound. Both captives were secured to the logs by a cord about their right arms, their captives being behind them; the logs screening the heads of all from the south bank.

Dancing Fawn still retained her knife, and anxiously awaited a chance to use it.

That chance came, through the whoops of the war-party, as they charged up the river.

While this was going on, Frio Frank was dashing headlong, half-insane, down a cow-path, along the river-bank, but screened by the bushes.

The moon shone brightly on the river, but it was dark in the bottom-timber; and Frank, at a bend, flew headlong into the river!

This gave the Creek squaw her opportunity, and she drove her knife to the hilt in her captor's breast; jerking him, at the same instant, beneath the water, to drown his death-yell.

Then she swam beneath the surface, and pulled the other Apache under; but he struggled free, and clutching Bertie, raised his knife over her head!

But Frio Frank, as he arose to the surface, had recognized her.

Herculean were his efforts, as he spurned the water, and his soul was filled with anguish and horror, as the Indian shot up from the river, and raised his glittering knife over that gold-crowned head. But strength was still furnished him, and he slew the savage captor of his darling, and rescued her.

While this was transpiring, Auntie Sue, who had partly revived, and wandered down the river, discovered her son, Romeo, apparently dead. With a bitter cry, the old negress fell fainting beside him.

This shriek led Frio Frank, Dancing Fawn, and Bertie, to the "open," when the unconscious couple were revived, and all went on together to the ranch.

The Apaches were gone, and our friends reunited.

Chiota, the next day, followed the Apache trail, to be dumfounded at evening, by the arrival of twenty-five more warriors to join Lone Wolf, and the departure of the war-party toward the Rio Frio; going in an exact course to lead to Forbes Ranch, the home of Frio Frank.

Again were our friends startled and agonized, but they at once organized to save, if possible, the Forbes family from massacre.

Their successes and defeats will be given as we proceed.

CHAPTER III.

AN ORGANIZED EFFORT.

Frio Frank stood speechless as he realized fully the awful significance of the statement of Chiota; when the latter strode in and reported, in his peculiar manner, the departure of the Apache war-party toward the Rio Frio.

For three days and nights, Frank and Bill had been in a tortured state of mind and body, either as captives themselves, or using every exertion to rescue others from the merciless savages.

Although neither Bandera Bill, his father, nor his sister, had ever met the Forbes family, with the exception of Frank; yet they knew them well by reputation, and felt as sincere sympathy and concern as they could have entertained had they been on intimate terms with them all.

Frio Frank had met his fate, and it seemed to him that it was most terribly unjust that, just as he had relieved his tortured mind by rescuing the one dearer to him than all the earth from the fiends of the Rio Pecos, he must tear himself from her side—tearing his very heart-strings—and hasten, to gallop like the wind nearly all night in his worn and fatigued condition, to defend his parents, his sister, and his home, from Lone Wolf and his demon horde.

Frank had served in the Rangers, and as escort and guide to wagon-trains; consequently, he had been in many a fight with the Apaches, who knew him, and doubtless were aware of the location of his home.

If this was so, they intended to avenge themselves on the young man for slaying their braves and assisting in the defense of Bancroft Ranch, which they had just been prevented from capturing. The direction they had taken seemed to indicate their intention.

To be sure, the Hondo, Deer, and other small creeks, were between the Rio Medina and the main Rio Frio; these being tributaries of the same, and running almost due south. But there were no ranches on these streams, except near their junction with the Frio, and but few at that.

However, there was but one course open for Frank to pursue, and that was to speed at once toward his home.

Bandera Bill and the Creek chief had decided on the instant that they would follow up the Apaches, and assist in preventing the home of their prairie pard from being destroyed, and the old ranchero was so filled with gratitude at the heroic services rendered by the young man that he insisted upon Marker Mose, with four of the cowboys, accompanying Frank, Bill, and Chiota.

As not the slightest suspicion lingered in the minds of the Texans or the Creek that any danger was likely to threaten Bancroft Ranch during their absence, there was no anxiety entertained by either those who were leaving or those who intended to remain.

Poor Bertie was much distressed, on finding that both her brother and her lover were to face fresh dangers, in which they might be slain, and her young and happy life made desolate. Up to this time, she had been as joyous as a bird, and as free from care and trouble, but if all her bright anticipations were now to be dashed from her, existence would, she felt, be insupportable.

So overwhelming were the thoughts and the dread possibilities that arose in the young girl's mind, that for a long time she stood clinging to the arm of Dancing Fawn, and staring at Frio Frank, as the latter prepared for the trail.

Frank and Bill had already suffered so much, that the dread news brought by Chiota completely dazed them for a time.

Old Ben Bancroft, after looking for some moments at his idolized daughter whom he had feared he would never again behold, began to bustle about, entertaining but little apprehension as to the safety of his son. Indeed, the ranchero had, with good grounds, come to the conclusion that Bill, Frank, and the Creek were invincible.

He did not fail to notice that Bertie was suffering great anxiety in regard to the departure

of the young men, and he could not wonder at it; but he strove to impart to her some of his cheerful anticipations.

Auntie Sue, now almost herself again, "hustled around lively" at her usual avocation, cooking food sufficient for a company of hungry rangers. This came in good use, however, to be packed in the *malettos* of those who were going on this scout to the Rio Frio.

The horses of the party were fresh, and full of fire and vim; and had been selected by Marker Mose as animals that were known to be hardy and fleet of foot.

Chiota, after giving his information, went again to the timber, soon returning with his black steed, fully equipped, his carbine upon his saddle-horn, and after examining his arms, he stepped up in front of his squaw.

The eyes of the two met, speaking more plainly their regard and the emotions born of the coming parting, than words could have done.

Bertie, in her gratitude, and in her deep respect and regard for the noble chief who had done so much for them all, clasped his bronzed hand, and Indian-like, pressed his palm to her breast, saying with much feeling:

"May the Good Spirit bless my red brother! You will not let the Apaches kill Will and Frank? Oh! I shall be in such torture until you return."

"My white brothers' eyes sharp. Got fast shooting-guns. Apaches, they squaws. War-trail open. War-cry on lips of Chiota. Dancing Fawn, she stay with Bertie. It is good."

Thus spoke the Creek chief.

"Oh, I hope and pray!" exclaimed the maiden, "that you will all return safe!"

"Chiota's heart grow big in breast when see Bertie, when hear Bertie talk like song of birds. Bertie, she sister of Chiota, sister of Dancing Fawn. It is good. War-trail open."

Then, catching up the scalp of the spy, Red Elk, the Creek attached it to the mane of his mustang, and circling his long knife over his plumed head, he shot out the war-whoop of his tribe.

It was plainly evident that Chiota was not only eager to go on the trail, but was rejoiced at an opening for gaining further revenge upon his hated foes.

Bandera Bill, taking his sister upon his arms, said to her, in a low voice:

"Don't worry, Bertie dear! We will take good care of ourselves. Show no more anxiety, before Frank, than you can possibly avoid. The poor fellow is nearly distracted already. Now, sister mine, we must cheer up, and we must both try and cheer poor Frank in this new misery and apprehension."

"We'll all be gay when we come back, and Auntie Sue will be in her glory, cooking for all hands. Come, give me a kiss, Bertie. Now, brace up! Put on your brightest smiles, and wish us God-speed. By-by!"

Hastily kissing the fair girl, Bandera Bill sprung to the side of his father, whose naturally jolly face had recovered much of its usual appearance.

The farewells between father and son were almost childish in the emotions that were manifested; so affectionate and demonstrative were they.

As Bill left Bertie, the latter saw Frio Frank approach, and she strove with all her power to throw off her anguish and apprehension at parting; turning, and going into the ranch, to avoid having the farewell scene observed by others.

Frank followed her, by a great effort of will crushing down the mental agony that was his.

"Bertie Bancroft," he said, with deep feeling, as he sprung forward into the apartment, Dancing Fawn having considerably remained on the veranda; "Bertie, my darling, my love and life—I am about to leave you!"

"Duty calls me to defend my home, and those there who are very dear to me. It is quite possible that I may be killed; but, as the past few days' events—events most tragic—have been a succession of narrow, of miraculous escapes for us all, let us hope that our Heavenly Father will still guard us."

"But I must here, before I leave you, my darling, declare that from the moment I first gazed into your eyes, I have loved you as few men, I do believe, can love!"

"I confess to you now, in words, that love which my looks and acts must have many times declared, and that more strongly than my words can do. Bertie, I love you more than my life!"

"Can it be that I am so blessed as to be loved by you—that I have not been, in my own blind love, deceived by the belief that it is returned?"

Bertie Bancroft, if God permits me to come back to you, will you be my wife?"

As Frank finished, he caught the trembling maiden in his arms.

Bertie quickly clasped her arms around the neck of her hero, who lifted her from the floor to his breast—her head upon his shoulder, her golden hair hanging in wild abandon over it, as he gazed into her eyes.

"Frank Forbes," she returned, "I love you more than all the world. May God protect you, preserve your dear ones, and bring you back to Bertie!"

That was all.

Frio Frank realized that the poor girl was making superhuman efforts to control herself, and that to prolong the interview would be cruelty to both; he, therefore, quickly placed her in a chair, saying, as he rushed from the apartment:

"God bless and keep you, my Bertie!"

Filled with the sympathy for her lover, the maiden went out again upon the veranda, and stood beside Dancing Fawn.

Into their saddles sprung the five cowboys, as did likewise Bill and Frank—Chiota being already mounted. Then, with a wave of sombreros and a Texan yell, all drove deep their spurs and galloped at full speed from the bend; the three Mexicans and two cowboys that remained, and the ranchero himself, giving parting cheers.

Bertie waved her handkerchief, and old Auntie Sue a bandana of brilliant colors, while Romeo danced and yelled, repudiating his wounded head, and Chunk added his bark to the "send off" shouts of the Texans and Mexicans.

The beautiful Creek squaw alone was characteristically quiet.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RUSE OF THE REDS.

WHEN the Apaches had been repulsed, and lashed their mustangs into the bottom-timber, they were not only appalled at the disaster that had befallen them, but were filled with superstitious terror.

Even Lone Wolf, much less superstitious than any of his braves, was filled with dread at the hideous monstrosity that had advanced to meet them. Especially affrighted were the survivors, now twenty-five in number, when, upon coming to a halt at a small "open," the "Bad Spirit," in the shape of Black Buzzard in the bearskin, broke forth from the undergrowth.

Instantly, howls of horror came from the terrified Indians, and they lashed their mustangs up the river toward their old camp.

A few side scouts had been ordered to keep along the bank of the river, and others near the margin of the plain, and it so happened that the former came upon the flayed carcass of the bear.

This at once banished their fears, for they decided that the monster they had seen was one of the Texans gotten up to frighten them.

At once, upon reaching the camp, they informed Lone Wolf of their discovery, and the Apache chief was most jubilant over it. He ordered a lookout to be kept up for the supposed masquerading Texan, the warriors being astonished and relieved as well as ashamed at having been thus imposed upon.

Satisfied that nothing unearthly was connected with the object that had so terrified them, they were now all anxious for a shot at it.

This, however, did not banish the fact that they had met with most unprecedented disaster death, or lessen their belief that the Medina and river was "bad medicine" for an Apache war-party. Even Lone Wolf was satisfied as to this, and realized when too late the foolishness of charging upon a "log-lodge," within which were Texans armed with deadly rifles.

Resolved that in future he would resort to stratagem, and not attack a ranch until he knew the number of its defenders, the chief proceeded to get into order the demoralized remnant of his war-party, and it was while thus engaged that the monster which had so terrified them all burst into the camp.

Instantly a score of arrows cut the air, and were buried in the doomed Black Buzzard, who, in his last agony, burst the gag from his mouth, and sent out the death-howl of his tribe!

The Apaches were dumfounded.

Lone Wolf sprung forward, knife in hand, and slashed open the bear-skin, revealing the form of one of his own young warriors.

Horrible howls greeted this discovery.

They had slain one of their own braves—one of the worst omens, in their belief, that could

have happened. This was more "bad medicine" to a certainty.

At once they decided to hasten to the fastnesses of the Bandera Hills.

Each brave who had drawn bow, now contributed a scalp from his belt or shield, to be buried with their ill-starred fallen warrior, thus relinquishing a trophy of savage honor and rank, in order that Black Buzzard might enter into the Bright Valley beyond the moon with as high a position as he could possibly have attained had he not been cut off, on his first war-path, by his own comrades.

After the burial, all galloped free from the timber, and up along the same to a gorge in the Bandera Hills, where they remained until near sunset. Then they equipped their mustangs, and with a far-sounding war-whoop, Lone Wolf announced his intention of galloping to the Frio to attack Forbes Ranch. This was greeted with loud yells, and the five and twenty Apache fiends dashed south toward the Rio Hondo, a branch of the Frio.

Before galloping a mile, however, the war-party jerked jaw-strap, their mustangs making sudden halt, and a terrific yell of welcome shot from every savage throat, for, just dashing from the narrow ribbon of timber that marked the course of a small creek, was a mounted band of Apaches, equal in number to themselves.

These had branched off from the main war-party the day before the Bandera Hills were reached, and had gone to inspect the small branches of the Hondo and Deer creeks, to ascertain if there were any ranches upon these streams.

Unsuccessful in their search, they had decided to start toward the Rio Medina, and rejoin Lone Wolf.

Greatly rejoiced was the chief, at this unexpected increasing of his force to double the number, and he resolved, now that he was able, to have revenge upon those who had slain his braves.

Here was a grand opportunity.

He would proceed to the Rio Frio, and burn Forbes Ranch, slaying all who might there be found, capturing the females for a worse fate.

The warriors, who were now coming to join him, should return and capture Bancroft Ranch! A cunning plot, Lone Wolf conceived in his brutal brain.

He believed that the keen-eyed Creek chief and the Texans were on the alert at the bend, and watching at all points to discover in what direction he went when he departed, or if he intended again to attack the ranch.

He would now make this work to his own advantage.

The proceedings that followed will enable the reader to understand the scheme concocted by the Apache chief, which could not fail to jeopardize all our friends, as well as those on the Rio Frio.

The meeting of the two sections of the war-party was a terrifically imposing scene, both dashing headlong toward each other, with frightful yells, as though they were enemies, and each body of braves sought the death of the other; their bows and arrows in hand.

Not until both formed a whirlpool of bounding and snorting mustangs, flying hair, flaunting feathers, and writhing forms and arms—which, to an observer, would have appeared like a most fiendish fight—not until then, at a whoop from Lone Wolf, did each jerk jaw-strap, and all, with mustangs pulled to haunches, sent out a terrific yell of mutual greeting; which, however, would to a civilized ear seem far from a sound that could be interpreted as expressive of a welcome from friends who had just met.

A few hasty and suggestive gestures, between each party of braves, was all that passed in communicating the disaster and death on the Medina war-trail.

At a signal from Lone Wolf, in a mad mass the fifty warriors dashed after their chief; the sun just disappearing behind the western plain, painting them in a flow of red gold, and glinting upon their ornaments, knives, and lances.

On, like a force of fiends, on in a frightful speed, insane for revenge, for blood and scalps, the savage horde sped. On they dashed, with the rush of a "norther," the fast-flying hoofs, through the prairie grass and flowers, sounding like the fierce wind we have mentioned, as its first furious breath sweeps grass and reeds to the earth.

On, with their long black hair, scalp decorations, and the manes and tails of their mustangs flying, feathers flaunting, and their quirts hissing through the air, to torture the hams of their snorting half-wild steeds, that, with black eyes

flashing, bound frantically over the prairie sword!

Slightly bent forward in their peculiar saddles, which were formed of a band of buffalo-skin, suspended from pointed horn and cantle, and swinging from side to side free from the animal's backbone—thus on, their snake-like eyes shooting glances over the plain toward Bancroft Ranch; which, from a gesture from those who had good reason to know its location, is made known to the new-comers.

All notice that Lone Wolf has changed his course a little east of south, when he might have dashed ahead, and taken advantage of the cover of the creek timber to shield the war-party and his course from possible watchful eyes on the Rio Medina.

For fully a mile they rode thus; and then, swerving to the original course, the chief headed south, almost parallel with the line of timber that marked the course of the creek.

By galloping a mile thus, and gradually quartering toward the timber, the same could be reached; and Lone Wolf would then be confident that his war-party had been seen by the Texans, and the Creek chief, at Bancroft Ranch.

The cunning Apache chief was positive that the eyes of Frio Frank had been fastened upon him and his warriors, and that the young scout would decide that his home was in danger, and his people.

This would cause the latter to act at once.

He would hasten to the Frio, taking as many of the defenders of Bancroft Ranch as would place the bend in a position in which it could be defended against those whom he intended to send back.

The timber was at length reached, and all halted at the wide, shallow portion of the stream.

Not until then did Lone Wolf disclose his plans, in the way of orders.

Those braves, who had been with him on the Rio Medina, were to continue with him to the Rio Frio; while those who had recently joined him were, under Big Panther, to dash back to the Bandera Hills, and along the margin of the west side of the line of timber—thus screened from all view at the Medina, or on the plains which lay to the south and west of the bend.

But they were to remember that the ever-vigilant Chiota would be on the trail, and that he must be deceived, if possible.

Previous to the start of Lone Wolf from the hills, he dispatched the extra mustangs, whose masters had been slain, by two braves, to the southwest; they passing west of the line of timber. Big Panther was, likewise, at once informed of the plan of his superior chief.

A brave was also sent up the bed of the stream, and dashed into the undergrowth at a distance from the crossing-place of the war-party, and sped toward the distant herd. Upon reaching the extra mustangs, twenty-five were driven to the stream, and into and down the bed of the same, to the crossing-place.

Each of Lone Wolf's party took a mustang in lead, while Big Panther and his five-and-twenty warriors proceeded up the bed of the creek a reasonable distance, and then surmounted the bank, passing through the bottom-timber. Then they dashed along the same, north, toward the Bandera Hills; while the chief, with as many horses as he needed, entered the ford, and sped from the same, up the west bank, and then south along the timber line, on his way to the Rio Frio.

Thus, by a cunning ruse, Lone Wolf deceived any but the most skillful trailer—and he with daylight to aid him—as to there having been any division of his war-party.

Again, black clouds of despair, and anguish, and death, rolled toward Bancroft Ranch; from which dash Chiota, Frio Frank, and Marker Mose, with half of his boys—the principal defenders of Bertie, the belle of the bend, of Dancing Fawn, the beautiful squaw of the Creek chief, of faithful Auntie Sue, of Romeo, and of Bancroft Ranch!

Had Lone Wolf lingered a moment or two on the east side of the timber of the creek which he forded, he would have discovered this cavalcade of avengers; but time was too precious to delay, and he saw them not.

Would our friends reach the creek, and ford it in time to find out, by the warning light, the ruse of the Apache chief?

The life and death—ay, the more terrible fight, a thousand times, than death, to Bertie Bancroft, and Dancing Fawn, depended, in all human probability, on this; and the lives of the few defenders of the ranch, besides the safety of the ranch itself.

God help poor Frio Frank, whether the stratagem of Lone Wolf be discovered or not!

If it be, the safety of father, mother, sister, and home, call him one way; and the more than life of one who, to him, is far more than his own life, call him another way!

CHAPTER V.

ADVANCING TOWARD THE FRIO.

At the time of which we are speaking, it was the custom from necessity, in connection with the dangerous and destructive Indian raids, for those locating their houses on the southwestern border, to erect them in places as secluded as possible. The consequence of this was that horse-shoe bends—and the narrower the entrance the better—were selected.

And, in a horse-shoe bend of the Rio Frio, was Forbes Ranch; as was Bancroft Ranch, on the Rio Medina.

There was no chance whatever of its being discovered from the south plain, as timber and dense undergrowth for half a mile in width extended from the south bank to its border.

Thus, the river, on three sides of the ranch, prevented any charge upon it by "horse" Indians, as were all that frequented this border.

Mr. Forbes had been located on the Frio for a year before old Ben Bancroft established himself on the Medina; he having migrated from Eastern Texas, where his two children, Frank and Florence, had been educated.

Every year, however, made Forbes Ranch more dangerous, as a residence; for the reason that the stock increased in numbers, and necessarily filled the bottom-timber with beaten paths, besides leaving plain "sign" on the prairies.

But, as the cattle of old man Forbes ranged north of the Frio, between it and Deer Creek, where no war-party had ever been known to pass or encamp, the Forbes family had not been molested up to the time we bring them before the notice of the reader.

The dwelling was almost a counterpart of Bancroft Ranch, it being a style that prevailed through Texas and the Southwest generally. There were two negro cabins, a smoke-house and a bake-oven in the rear; the main building fronting south, toward the river, and but half a pistol-shot distant from the perpendicular bank. This was at least fifteen feet in height.

A beautiful flower-garden extended from the veranda nearly to the river, the same being kept in neat and tasteful order, attesting to the culture of the female inmates of the ranch.

The ranchero had brought a few of his slaves with him. These were two field-hands, with their wives, and seven children of both sexes, all under twelve years of age. The field hands were, however, acting as cowboys on the ranch, together with four Mexicans, who lived in a *jacal* of their own build, just within the timber from the clearing.

Mr. Forbes was a quiet, sedate man, and about the age of Ben Bancroft. He was spare in flesh, in fact tall and lank, and had long hair sprinkled with gray. He dressed in homespun breeches of butternut brown, washed, bleached, carded, woven, and made up by his wife and fair daughter; top-boots, slouched hat, and the inevitable belt of arms, to complete his "make-up."

Old man Forbes was brave and daring, as his presence on that exposed border proved.

He was skilled in the use of arms, and very quick when excited; walking in a long stride that few could keep up with, although he was seldom out of his saddle except when hunting in the timber.

His wife was of medium height, tall and robust, with a round, full, and rosy face; health and happiness being expressed in her hazel eyes, and upon her cheeks.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Forbes fairly worshiped their children, Frank and Floss.

Floss Forbes—well, we have spoken of the beauty of Bertie Bancroft, and fair, indeed, she was; but Floss Forbes was regally beautiful, perfectly princess-like in bearing, a head taller than Bertie, and with long and abundant dark brown hair, which hung at times in wavy masses far below her small waist.

Her neck was swan-like, her movements fawn-like, and indeed the perfection of grace, while her purely Grecian profile would have enraptured a cameo-cutter.

Floss was a brunette, and Bertie a blonde. The former had large limpid eyes of hazel, like those of her mother, and with long lashes.

Her home-spun costume, of mixed white and dark brown, was cut and fitted as well as any first-class *modiste* could have made it.

So also was that of her mother.

In short, Floss Forbes would have attracted

attention and admiration in an assemblage of beauties fully as much as Bertie Bancroft, although their types of beauty were directly opposite.

The ranch was far better furnished than was usual on the border, Floss having quite a library, as well as piano.

It would have been plain to any one meeting such a maiden on that far frontier that she might move, did she so desire, in the highest circles of society, feeling perfectly at home.

When Lone Wolf and his fiendish braves, murder-bent, dashed from the ford to gallop toward Deer Creek, and thence to the Rio Frio, as the fun was setting in the west, Forbes Ranch was wrapped in a semi-twilight. The air was cool, and the twittering birds were flitting from the prairie to seek their resting-places in the timber for the coming night.

The evening was beautiful and most enjoyable, and Floss sat with her mother knitting upon the veranda, while the old ranchero was with his negroes, giving them directions as to the salting of the cattle in the corrals on the following day. It was the custom, on the ranches, to do so every week, on a certain day; which, after it was continued for a time, would cause the stock to come in from the range on that particular day, when they could be counted without difficulty, and a beeve lassoed if necessary.

The two black cowboys were repairing their saddles, and their little ones, half nude, were frolicking on the grass.

Smoke curled lazily from a camp-fire before the *jacal* of the Mexicans, who were preparing their supper of dried beef, and the inevitable *tortilla*, or corn "slap-jack."

These cakes, the universal substitute for bread, are made by soaking the corn until it can be mashed into a soft state. It is then formed into thin, flat pancakes with the hands, in the same primitive manner as did the Egyptians three thousand years ago; corn-mills being unknown in Mexico, until introduced quite recently by the Americans.

Mother," spoke Floss, in a silvery voice, but which betrayed some mental worry; "I do wish Frank would return. I begin to feel apprehensive in regard to his absence; and it is strange that I should, for he has frequently been away for a much longer time.

"Last night, mother, I had a terrible dream. I thought I saw Frank secured to a stake, with a circle of hideous savages dancing around him. When I awoke, I was trembling all over."

"Had you been reading of any depredations committed by the Indians further north?"

"No, indeed, mother! And I had not thought of the red-men previous to my falling asleep; and this makes my dream appear the more strange.

"Not only that, but all this long day, the whole scene has been vividly impressed upon my mind. It has occupied my thoughts, notwithstanding I have striven to think of other matters. I was never thus impressed before."

"It is strange, Floss," returned Mrs. Forbes, also beginning to betray some uneasiness, and glancing toward the path, by which her son would, on his return, enter the clearing through the narrow ribbon of timber. "It is stranger, and more unaccountable, for the reason that I have had a presentiment of some danger, this entire day, originating from a dream not unlike your own, Frank being connected with it also.

"I have not mentioned it to you, for fear of needlessly worrying you; nor have I to your father, for fear of his ridicule. He would say we were superstitiously inclined, and would call our dreams and presentiments all nonsense."

"Yes, I have no doubt papa would," agreed Floss. "All of the human family are, I believe, more or less superstitious, but father appears to be free from such weakness. Perhaps we are foolish in thus borrowing trouble. Frank would laugh at us, did he know of it.

"Come, let us try and throw off the feeling. Brother has braved the dangers of the far frontier with the rangers, and is well able to take care of himself."

The young girl spoke thus to relieve her mother's mind, after finding that the latter was really worried, and that the feeling had been increased since she herself had spoken.

"Father is making his regular evening rounds," she continued, with the view of changing the current of her mother's thoughts. "He is going from the negroes to the Mexicans.

"But, mother, I see only two of the 'yellow-skins,' as Frank sometimes calls them. I wonder where Antonio can be?"

"I'm sure I do not know. They are generally

together, and I always thought that neither one of them dared remain alone on the prairie as late as this."

"Where is Antonio?" asked Mr. Forbes, as he strode up to the camp-fire.

"We do not know, Señor Forbes," answered one of them, Pedro by name. "He went after a deer, an hour before we started for the ranch."

"In what direction did he ride?"

"Toward Deer Creek, señor," was the reply.

"It is strange," mused the ranchero, in a low tone, more to himself than to the Mexicans.

Then he turned about, and strolled in a listless way toward the ranch, gazing downward as he went; a strange and unusual attitude for him, as his wife and daughter did not fail to notice.

For some time, the three sat together, upon the veranda, conversing on various topics; each striving to assume a cheerful voice and manner, although all were apprehensive of something. But, at the same time, not one of them could have given any reasonable explanation, in connection with their unaccountable forebodings of danger to come.

The ranchero had not failed to perceive that both of the Mexicans seemed greatly worried in regard to the non-arrival of their comrade; although they evidently strove not to betray it.

When the shades became dark, and the silvery moon bathed the ranch and clearing—except to the eastward of the building, where the towering trees cast their shadows—in a flood of light, then Mr. Forbes arose from his chair, suggesting that his wife and daughter should retire to their chambers, mentioning that he was going out to ascertain if Antonio had arrived.

The females knew well that the Mexican had not returned, and so also did the old ranchero, for they would have heard his horse, and also seen him ride up to the *jacal*. The remark of the husband and father, therefore, betrayed his anxiety, and they both resolved to await his return.

Upon reaching the *jacal*, Mr. Forbes found both of the Greasers smoking, as they stood near the smoldering fire, and with their eyes fixed upon the point at which Antonio must enter the clearing on his return.

Both the Mexicans started nervously as they detected the approach of their employer.

"Well, boys," said Mr. Forbes, "Antonio intends to camp on the prairie to-night, it seems."

"Antonio will—"

The Greaser stopped speaking abruptly, listening intently, as was his comrade.

Then, a moment after, both in chorus said, with great relief:

"Antonio comes! *Bueno!*"

And sure enough the sound of hoofs upon the sward came plainly and then more plainly.

Soon the missing man dashed from the line of timber that screened the ranch from the "open" of the bend headlong toward the house.

He appeared terrified and indeed speechless, and his horse was foam-flecked and panting from over-exertion.

As the animal halted, the ranchero clutched the bridle-rein and jerked him out into the bright moonlight.

One glance into Antonio's face revealed the fact that the Greaser was greatly affrighted.

"In Heaven's name, what's the matter with you, Antonio?" demanded Mr. Forbes, in a voice that betrayed his own excitement. "Speak, man, and to the point! Where have you been, and what has frightened you?"

"*Los Apaches!*" gasped the Greaser, in a half-whisper and with trembling lips.

"Good Heavens! Where? You must be mistaken, Antonio! How many?"

Antonio pointed, and answered in the same manner:

"Deer Creek—come from Hondo—big war-party—ride fast—come here straight this night!"

"You are sure of this?" demanded his employer, in a hoarse voice.

"*Dios grande* curse me if it is not the truth!" returned the Mexican, making the sign of the cross with his fingers.

"Get all your weapons instantly! Order the negroes into the ranch. Close the shutters, and stand guard on the veranda with Pomp and Julius!" exclaimed the ranchero.

"First, however, one of you go and saddle my horse! I'll go out on the plain and ascertain if the red fiends are really heading for this point. I want no cowardice now, for you've got to keep your wits about you or lose your lives!"

Mr. Forbes rattled these words off in the most rapid manner.

The startling intelligence seemed to have electrified him to action.

He ran, instantly, to the house, bade his wife

and daughter go inside, and dispose the furniture in such a manner as not to impede the movements of men at the loop-holes.

We may imagine the effect of this upon Mrs. Forbes and Floss.

They were dazed and speechless.

They stood, and looked at each other in silence.

Certainly their dreams and presentiments had not been without their dread signification.

Before either of them had recovered sufficiently to speak, the husband and father bounded from the veranda, and thence to the *jacal*, where he found Pedro, with his horse, which, agreeably to orders, he had equipped.

The old ranchero, sprung, at once, upon it, and spurred at full speed, from the clearing.

CHAPTER VI.

PREPARING FOR DEFENSE.

THE ranchero spared not spur, for he knew that the lives of his family and slaves depended upon his exertions; for, he felt that, unless there was some change in the Mexicans—unless they became recklessly brave, from being convinced that there was no hope of escape—and fought to the death, they would be of very little use in defending the ranch.

However, he was confident he could depend upon the negroes.

Pomp and Julius would fight like demons to protect their master and his family, and their own wives and little ones.

All plans of defense, and all command as well, must fall upon his shoulders; and, on the instant that Antonio made his report, Mr. Forbes had determined to satisfy himself in regard to the truth of it.

He had not the slightest doubt that the Greaser had seen the Indians, and perhaps that the latter were galloping toward the Frio; but the ranchero wished to satisfy himself as to the truth of the latter report, and also to find out, if possible, the number of red marauders there were in the war-party.

It was not at all unlikely that the man's fears might have magnified them.

Mr. Forbes knew that, had there been no more than a half-dozen, Antonio would have decided there were at least half a hundred.

For three years had the old ranchero resided, with his loved ones, on that dangerous border, and in all that time no Indians had been seen between his ranch and Deer Creek; although war-parties had passed within a mile, on the opposite side of the timber—that is, on the south side of the Rio Frio—and had committed their atrocities on the Rio Hondo.

He had come to feel entirely secure, but he knew that the Indians might by chance discover his home at any time, or be led to it by the numerous cow-paths and stock-trails on the prairie.

While now riding out toward the plain, he congratulated himself upon having, when he first erected his dwelling, dug a tunnel from a small cellar beneath the same to the river-bank; and over the exit of which he had trailed thick vines to hide it from observation.

This passage, he then thought, might prove the means of escape should the savages attack his home and set it on fire.

There was now, he feared, but too great a prospect of this.

Greatly agonized was Mr. Forbes, as he sped north over the prairie, when he thought of his wife and daughter, and of the negroes.

He knew that both Mrs. Forbes and Floss must be suffering the most excruciating anguish and dread anxiety, on account of his own absence, that, had he lingered, they would have prayed him, upon bended knees, and with tears streaming down their cheeks, to remain with them, and not thus tempt fate by exposing himself.

If he should be slain, what could they do?

Surely the negroes could do nothing without a leader, or the Mexicans either.

These thoughts flashed through the old ranchero's mind, and he resolved that he would curb his natural recklessness, realizing how very much depended upon him.

His hatred toward the Apaches was intense, for several of his friends had been tortured and killed by them.

Why was it that, at this time, of all times, his brave and skillful son was absent?

This was a source of the greatest possible worry, yet nothing could be done. It seemed fated that it was to be so.

It was certainly providential that the Mexican, Antonio, had started in chase of the buck that afternoon; but his employer did not believe

that the Greaser had seen the savages on Deer Creek.

Antonio must have ventured through the timber of the latter stream, and seen the Apaches afar off, toward the Hondo.

This must have been the true state of affairs, Mr. Forbes decided, as the timber of Deer Creek became visible, and no indications of human beings of any description were to be seen.

But this did not entirely satisfy him.

He must know, definitely, the whole dreadful extent of the threatening calamity.

On, and still on, galloped the old ranchero, until he was within a half rifle-shot in distance from the timber line before referred to when suddenly he pulled rein; for the thought of the number who depended upon his safety, again flashed upon his mind.

With it, came another thought, which startled him.

This was that, even had the Greaser seen the Indians from the north of the timber line of the stream, now so near, the savages would have had ample time, since then, to reach Deer Creek, had they advanced directly toward the same!

Either the Apaches had continued on, down the stream, on the opposite or north side, and were now screened from his view by the timber; or, they had discovered his approach, and were lying in wait, to ambush and capture him.

"Thank God!" was the prayerful ejaculation of the old ranchero, as he began to realize how near he probably might have been to death, had he proceeded.

Then, to fully satisfy himself, he resorted to a ruse.

He knew that his horse, especially as the animal was fresh, could easily outrun the Apache mustangs.

Being positive of this, he proceeded slowly a short distance further, and then halted; fazing up and down the timber line, as if searching for a stray animal.

Then he turned his horse about, as if he had given up the search.

The ruse succeeded.

Not five yards had he gone when, cut from the dark shades dashed two lines of Apache braves—one to his right, and another to his left, while more came on directly behind him!

Instantly he whirled his horse, and his rifle sprung to his shoulder. A loud report followed, and then, as an echo, out on the still night air, shot a terrible death-howl.

Hardly had this died away, when a whoop of war burst from every throat.

Then the ranchero drove spurs, and dashed toward the Rio Frio and his home; his horse skimming the plain like a ground-swallow.

Old man Forbes hastily reloaded his rifle, as he sped on; and then, when ready for another shot, he jerked his horse to haunches, and half-whirled the animal, facing the on-sweeping red demons, whose whoops now filled the night air.

The scene presented was a picture of the most noble and daring; and, at the same time, of the most cowardly and hellish.

The old man, singly and alone, with rifle thrown across the hollow of his left arm, thus waiting, with a murderous longing to annihilate the painted fiends, whose object was destruction, torture, and death to him and his!

On they came, their arrows fitted to bow-strings, and other deadly shafts held between fingers, ready to send the steel-pointed missiles of death in showers, toward the solitary Texan, who confronted them with the mien of an avenging god!

The Apaches came on in a crescent-shaped line, the outer points of which were heading toward the ranchero's right and left—seeking thus to inclose him in a savage circle of death.

Then, as he suddenly threw his rifle to his shoulder, a volley of arrows cut the air; for he had permitted, in his reckless disdain, the Apaches to attain a point less than sixty yards from him.

Yet he sat, undaunted.

Three arrows pierced his clothing, and his sombrero was shot from his head.

However, he pulled trigger before the feathered shafts reached him, and another warrior fell to the prairie sward, pierced through the vitals by his bullet.

Then the horse, maddened by the pain of the arrow-points, whirled with a terrified snort, and shot toward the Rio Frio at terrific speed, while the yells of vengeful fury that followed him, most forcibly reminded the ranchero of the horrors those demons were ready to inflict upon his dear ones.

He must reach the ranch in advance of them.

And nobly did his gallant steed serve him, leaving the red pirates of the plains further and further in his rear; the timber of the Frio that shielded from view his darlings, winding like a dark ribbon upon the wide plain that stretched out before him.

Soon he reached the dark shades and then no longer in his rear could he see the black spots scattered upon the prairie. The frantic Apaches had been unable to keep near him, although lashed with torturing quirts, and pierced with scalping knife-points.

Mr. Forbes had been too cunning to head direct to the bend, as he was positive the Apaches knew not the exact location of his home.

He entered the timber about half a mile above and then tore down a cow-path toward his ranch, with little less speed than when dashing over the prairie.

In a few moments more he was in the clearing, where stood his agonized wife and daughter.

Neither of them could speak a word, but both gazed into his face, striving to read by the expression of the same, some hope that Antonio had been mistaken.

The ranchero sprung from his saddle, struck the horse a blow with his hand, and the fatigued, foam-covered animal staggered into the shades.

This act, in itself, was sufficient proof to the fearfully anxious wife and daughter that their lives and homes were in danger, and the expression of the husband and father's face told this as plainly as the words that followed:

"Antonio's eyes did not deceive him! His report was but too true. The red demons are really coming!

"I have shot two of them. Keep a sharp lookout, boys! You've got to fight or die, so no shirking. The first man I see show the white feather, I'll blow his brains out!

"Now, my dears, you must prove yourselves true Texan women! Keep watch from the loopholes. You can both shoot, fortunately. Only keep calm, and obey every order I give.

"I am going now to reconnoiter. Stay inside, and make no noise. All depends upon silence and cool action."

So saying, Mr. Forbes rushed toward the open portion of the bend, rifle in hand.

The agony of mind and apprehension of Mrs. Forbes and Floss were too deep to find expression in words. They entered the dwelling, both controlling themselves by a great effort, and taking their stations at the same end of the apartment, on the east end of the house.

At each end of the verandas, front and rear, stood a negro, or a Mexican, rifle in hand; their forms hidden by the vines on the supporting posts.

The negroes were on the west end, that being the point at which the Apaches were expected.

One of the Greasers stood at the door of the apartment, in which were the women and children, both white and black; the little ones being now asleep.

All was still about Forbes Ranch—still as the death that seemed fated to come down upon them all!

CHAPTER VII.

SEEN BY THE RELIEF PARTY.

CHIOTA, Bandera Bill, Frio Frank, Marker Mose, and the four cowboys, when they galloped from Bancroft Ranch, out from the bend upon the open plain, could see, far away to the southward, a slowly moving black mass; the glitter of the reflection from the red sunset sky upon the silver ornaments of the Apaches, being at times plainly seen, and now and then the glint of lance-points above the heads of the savages. This to an experienced eye, would have proved the character of the moving mass, even had they been without any information in regard to them.

Frio Frank's fear for those at his home, mingled with the strong emotions occasioned by being forced to part with Bertie Bancroft, was almost more than he could endure; for, he at once, as well as those with him, realized that, were the intentions of Lone Wolf as suspected, the savages would reach the Rio Frio before they could overtake them. Especially would this be the case, did the war-party become aware of their unit; for the latter would run their mustangs to death, to gain the ranch ahead of the pursuers, and do their infernal work. How could this be averted?

Frio Frank honestly believed that there could be no more heavy cross put upon a human being than that which he was now called upon to bear, and that human being retain his reason; yet, he scarce dreamed of what was before him.

He was fated to be ten times more burdened with anguish and agony of soul, and that too within the hour, although, had he been told that such was possible, he would have declared that deeper misery than he now suffered there could not be.

His very soul was racked, his brain seeming to seethe, and expand against its natural casket, as if it would burst.

Bandera Bill cast frequent glances of pity and sympathy at his friend's haggard, pallid, and agony-drawn face, as did also the Creek chief.

There was neither time nor inclination for words. Indeed, it was decidedly an occasion for acts, in place of words.

Every eye became fixed upon the far-away moving mass, which, they were well aware, was speeding like leaves before a gale.

But, ere long, the Apache war-party had disappeared amid the dark timber of the Hondo.

Chiota and the young Texans noted well the spot.

Time passed, and our friends, not having spared their horses, reached the ford, where Lone Wolf had put in practice his strategy.

The Creek chief, being in the lead, and eager to study the trail on the south bank, while yet there was sufficient light from the gradually-dying red glow of sunset, forced his horse near the opposite bank before allowing the animal to drink.

Then, sitting his steed, Chiota, ever suspicious, scrutinized the hoof-prints in the moist soil and mud.

"Ugh!"

This guttural ejaculation burst at once from the Creek's throat.

His keen eyes had detected, on the instant, that there were led animals with the war-party.

As there had been none except those that were ridden, when he had inspected the remnant of Lone Wolf's band, and as he was confident that the party of warriors which had joined the Apache chief did not have any extra animals in the lead, his suspicions as to something being wrong were doubled.

Quickly he loosened the neck-ropes from his saddle-horn, and sprung from his horse to the bank.

The Texans watched the chief anxiously, and with some surprise.

They did not understand why there should be any attention paid to the trail.

Surely their proper course was to speed direct to Forbes Ranch, in a bee-line, regardless of the trail of the Apaches.

This course might possibly—ay, probably—be the means of their reaching the ranch ahead of the savages; and thus they would gain every advantage.

Not one of the party had the remotest suspicion that the Apaches, after being reunited, had again separated.

Chiota, the Creek, however, held many secret thoughts in his brain; and one was that Lone Wolf was too revengeful to let the people of Bancroft Ranch off, without another attempt at destroying the home of Bandera Bill, and capturing or slaying his relatives.

Upon his hands and knees Chiota now examined critically the hoof-prints, carefully estimating their number.

His keen eyes, even when he was upon his horse, had noticed that many of the tracks were sunk much deeper than the others.

It was an easy matter for a skilled trailer to distinguish by the hoof-prints the led from the ridden horses.

Both Bandera Bill and Frio Frank, who had become impatient, urged their animals to the border of the bank, and at once detected that at least half of the mustangs that had advanced up the bank from the ford were not ridden. They could not fail to perceive this.

It took but a momentary inspection to decide Chiota that the same number of animals had passed up the south bank from the ford, and that there were warriors in both the war-parties after joining each other—that is, fifty.

He also knew that the Indians had not "doubled," or one sprung up behind another, as is sometimes done when animals give out on the trail, for there was no occasion for this.

With a gesture for the Texans to follow through the timber, Chiota passed along directly south, leaving the plainly-marked trail of the Apaches, which swerved easterly through the shades.

Soon they all reached a point from which they could gaze out over the plain. Then the Creek chief pointed away to the westward.

There, a moving dark mass was plainly discernible.

All knew, however, that this was not the Apaches.

"Let my white brothers wait. Chiota soon read trails."

With these words the Creek galloped at full speed up along the line of timber for some distance, when he halted and sprang to the earth. But almost instantly he remounted, and rode at a terrific rate of speed on his return.

"May Heaven sustain you now, Frio Frank!"

There was a terrible look in the eyes of Chiota, as his black steed bounded in among the Texans, who had dashed clear of the undergrowth when they saw the chief returning.

"Lone Wolf forgets not revenge," said Chiota. "So many braves"—indicating with his fingers twenty-five—"ride fast up Hondo to Bandera Hills. When moon there"—pointing to the western sky—"they ride fast down Medina to Bancroft Ranch."

"Sound war-cry, kill, scalp, burn. Lone Wolf same warriors ride fast to Frio, down Hondo. Go to ranch of my white brother, Frio Frank. Lone Wolf have herd horses. Braves shoot from. Drive from hills down Hondo."

"This side Chiota no see. All stay in ford. Bring mustangs. Big Panther, with braves, ride up Hondo in water. Soon ride out on plain. Lash mustangs. Go fast to hills. Lone Wolf's braves lead mustangs."

"Think too dark, trail no show 'sign,' but Chiota eyes sharp. Bad, heap bad. Some go back to Medina. Some ride fast Frio. Talk quick. Who go south? Who go north?"

The eyes of Dill and Frank fairly glared, with a glassy look, into the face of the Creek chief as he spoke.

Both, with lips apart, gasped for breath, panted, and grew as pallid as corpses.

"Oh, where, where is God's justice?" gasped out Frio Frank, at length. "Fly, pard Bill! Fly on the back trail, and defend your father and sister! Let us divide forces at once."

"A life, yes, many lives, may depend upon a single moment. Your sister is my promised wife, Bill. Do not, I implore you, let harm come to her!"

"The safety of my father, mother, and sister, call me south; and that of my more than life, north. I must galloped toward the Frio at once, or I shall be forced toward the Medina. May God help us all!"

Like a madman, Frio Frank drove spurs, and dashed off in the direction of his home.

It was plainly his duty to do so, and just as plain was it the duty of Bandera Bill to speed on the back trail to his own home, his father and sister.

Such an occurrence as the war-party dividing had not been dreamed of by any except Chiota, and had not the chief thought such a move probable, the facts would not have been ascertained so soon by him.

The situation was now most perplexing, but the Creek had his thoughts and plans, and he expressed them in words:

"Dancing Fawn, she squaw of Chiota: she on Medina. Chiota go on back trail. It is good. Bandera Bill, he go on back trail."

"Marker Mose take his boys to Frio. Help fight Lone Wolf. He bad, heap bad. Big Panther he bad, not heap bad. Come! War-trail open. War-cry on lips."

There was not the slightest hesitation on the part of any. Each started as thus directed.

But not far had Frank gone when one foreleg of his steed was thrust into a burrow, the bone snapping, and the poor beast going down, never to rise. There, too, the rider lay unconscious, when Marker Mose and his boys galloped up to the spot.

Frank was, however, with the aid of whisky and water from the canteens, recovered; but awaking only to deeper depths of anguish, and almost utter despair. The wonder indeed was that the young man kept his reason.

There was but little delay from this accident, for all knew they must hasten on to the Frio.

Frank mounted behind one of the cowboys, and away the six dashed, to the succor of Forbes Ranch.

Frank sprung from one horse to another, frequently changing; his brain, one wild whirlpool of agonizing thoughts and imaginary impossibilities—a hellish panoramic view of savage scenes flitting through his tortured mind; Bertie Bancroft, the leading and prominent figure and sufferer in each and all.

But the Apaches had a favorable start, and unlike their pursuers had taken a straight course. The consequence was that, when Frank's father approached the timber of Deer Creek, where the Apaches having observed him lay hidden to ambush him—at that very

time, his brave son and the cowboys were dashing toward the timber that secreted the Indians, going toward the south. And, had they not heard the rifle reports, all no doubt would have dashed clear of the timber, and thus have been taken at a fearful disadvantage.

The race for life, and the escape of his father, were witnessed by the young Texan and the cowboys; who were now compelled to gallop far to the westward, and strike a timbered creek that ran into the Frio some two miles above Forbes Ranch.

This, they then followed down for some distance, screened by the dense shades from the view of the Apaches.

CHAPTER VIII.

THROUGH THE TUNNEL.

A DEATHLIKE silence reigned at Forbes Ranch.

As was natural, the two negroes were nerved to desperation by the thought that their wives and children were in danger, and they were resolved to fight like demons.

Had the Mexicans dared, they would have deserted their employer, and taken to the shades; but they imagined the savages to be lurking everywhere in the dark timber.

Mrs. Forbes and Floss believed fully that the coming danger had cast its shadow before; that they had been warned, by dreams and presentiments of the approach of the red demons. But, they were naturally brave and self-reliant, and they were determined to do all in their power to defend their home and lives.

If only Frank were at home!

They had every confidence in the husband and father, but then knew that one man could not be in several places at the same time.

The negro women sat, weeping and trembling, while they watched the slumbers of their little ones; every possible atrocity, that the Indians could commit, flashing through their minds.

Old man Forbes kept along within the border of the timber, on the west side of the bend, until at the entrance of the same. From this point, he could gain a view of the plain, over which he had just galloped, and from which he had dashed into the timber.

To his relief, he saw the Apaches galloping headlong toward the very point where he had struck the shades. This proved that they did not know the location of the ranch.

Back on his trail he strode at a quick pace, when he bethought himself that it would be a good idea to equip some of his saddle-horses and secrete them in the thickets east of the clearing. There was ample time for this before the savages could come up, and it was possible in the darkness that they might take a wrong direction.

Calling the two negro men to his assistance, equipments for a dozen animals were taken from a cabin, and as many horses made ready for use. These were led from the corral and secured to limbs of trees some distance from the clearing, and near the bank of the river.

Then the three hastened to the ranch, and all went inside, barring the doors with heavy oaken bars. The open space in the center of the dwelling was floored above, and, by ascending a stairway the occupants of one apartment could reach the other.

The old ranchero hastened to his wife and daughter, cheering them by his words and manner as far as was possible; although he was far from being confident that he could defend his home successfully.

Had there not been the underground passage to the river, he would have been in a most despondent and hopeless condition.

But, as yet, there were no indications of the presence of enemies in the vicinity, which showed that Lone Wolf had decided upon a different mode of operations from that pursued by him at Bancroft Ranch.

Soon, however, sounds were heard; and, unobserved, half a score of the red fiends crawled to the cook's cabin, against which leaned a large hewn log. This, they dragged, noiselessly toward the dwelling.

Gaining a position just clear of the first loop-hole on the front side of the western end of the building, they rushed toward the door of the east department—bringing the end of the huge piece of timber within three feet of it; when, with a lunge forward, all sprung free!

The concussion was terrific, in force and sound; indeed, few doors could have withstood the shock. The iron sockets, which held in place the upper bar of the door, were driven clear from the logs; the bar flying half across the room. The upper hinge was also broken, and the lower one bent; thus forcing the top of the door inward, sufficiently for one man at a

time, or two by crowding, to spring into the room.

No sooner had the crash sounded, than every Apache shot out a fearful war-whoop, each as one; and a rush was made for the half-open door.

The scene and sounds, that followed, beggar description.

The negro women and their children shrieked and screamed in terror, huddling together, but powerless to flee up the stairway.

Both Mrs. Forbes and Floss uttered cries of alarm, as they beheld two hideous, painted faces at the partly-crushed door. Candles were burning in the apartments, but clothing had been hung up before the loop-holes, and under it the watchers had thrust their heads.

In another moment, two Indians had crowded over the door, while Mrs. Forbes and her daughter stood as if paralyzed. Quickly they recovered, however; and, having taken up their rifles, they aimed, and pulled trigger.

One of the braves gave a terrible death-howl, and fell over among the negro children, a corpse. War-whoops now rung out, above the cries of the terrified slaves. More Apaches sprung in, the first splitting the head of a negro boy with his tomahawk.

But he made no further move. A bullet pierced his brain, from the ranchero's rifle.

All the inmates of the ranch now saw that they were in the greatest danger.

Frantically they hastened up the stairway to the flooring of the loft, and rushing across it, the women and children beheld the awful scene below.

After shooting the Apache, old man Forbes had darted forward to protect his loved ones—the two negroes following.

Two more savages fell before the ranchero's revolver, and then he yelled:

"Up the stairs now, all of you! Climb for life!"

He was speedily obeyed, but none too soon for their safety.

Feathered shafts flew into the apartment, and a hail of leaden bullets out the door; but the Indians soon sprung from the opening, for they realized that they had not only lost four of their number, besides several being wounded, but that they had gained nothing. Indeed, the bursting in of the door, had been but the forming of a death-trap for themselves.

Their signal-whoops revealed this to Lone Wolf and the remainder of the war-party, who were in the timber, waiting to shoot down all who might rush from the besieged ranch.

The fury of the Apache chief was fiendish.

The next instant, he and those of the warriors who remained with him, rushed into the clearing; bounding from side to side, to avoid the aim of those at the loop-holes. But there was no danger, as the charge was made from the west, and the apartment on that end of the building was unoccupied; except that the corpses of four of their number, and that of the negro lad, lay there.

All had, by this time, gained the east apartment, the Mexicans being stationed in the loft, to shoot down any Indian, who might rush in at the broken door.

During the terrible din, when all were demoralized by the fearful surprise which the Apaches had given them, the ranchero and the two slaves retained remarkable self-possession and control. They sprung at once to the loop-holes, after guarding the retreat of the women and children.

The Apache chief was frantic.

At his signal-yell all sprung along the veranda and from the west end of it; on, at command of the chief, striking a light with flint and steel, and igniting a lot of dry grass and twigs.

Then some of this was bound about arrow-points, and then, rocket-like, the fire-laden shafts shot through the air and upon the roof of the dwelling. Forbes Ranch was doomed!

In less than five minutes a shower of burning reeds and cinders would fall upon the heads of those in the east apartment.

The demons in paint and feathers danced wildly around the clearing, now brightly lighted up by the forked and hissing flames. They knew that they were in no further danger from the rifles of the Texans, for the time of the latter would now be fully occupied.

They were right, for the old ranchero at once abandoned his post, yelling out:

"No use, boys! We are doomed, if we can't escape by the underground passage to the river, which, as I have not been in it for a year, may be caved in and blocked up."

As he spoke he lifted a trap-door, and down a rude flight of steps passed his wife and daugh-

ter, both of them as pale as death, but still clutching their rifles.

Already sparks fell from the burning thatch. The Mexicans, with wild yells of terror, sprung from their perch into the west apartment, believing the crashed-in door to be the only means of escape from being roasted alive.

They knew nothing of the underground passage, and they could not see that the others were escaping in that way. But escape in some way they must.

It was a terrible moment!

A terrible moment to those who were descending into that dark tunnel, which, for aught they knew, might be closed up and prove to be their tomb. A terrible moment, for a shower of sparks fell into the room, and the negro women and children tumbled over each other with cries and moans. The two negro men stood with rifles clutched, but these were useless against the terrible enemy that caused them to cringe and the perspiration to pour from them.

It was a terrible moment to the three Mexicans, braced amid corpses on the blood-strewn floor of the west room, with hissing flames over their heads, and yelling fiends surrounding the building in which they were.

But it was death to linger, and out the trio dashed, to behold the veranda-roof blazing and a perfect rain of burning fragments falling upon the flooring; the smoke hiding all beyond, in the cool, free air, from their view.

Like madmen the three Greasers bounded through the shower of sparks and falling, burning reeds, their black eyes glaring with desperation and every nerve and muscle strained.

The Apaches, who had begun to think they were to be cheated out of their prey, gave out a yell of exultation in chorus, as a dozen of them darted forward, with uplifted weapons. Three rifle-shots, the guns aimed at random by the Mexicans, then a series of dull blows, and the three men lay, as if dead, at the feet of the red fiends.

Quickly they were bound, and Lone Wolf ordered them to be borne into the shades, where the mustangs had been left. Three braves started, dragging them along, and then another transformation took place.

The Apaches had surprised the people of the ranch. It was now their turn to be surprised.

Not half the distance between the burning ranch and the bordering timber of the clearing had been passed by the three warriors, who were dragging their Mexican captives, when a line of fire spurts shot from the shades, followed by a stunning report, and the three Apaches fell dead; while beyond, in the circle of exultantly whooping and dancing demons, three more death-howls were heard, as that number of the red-fiends threw their arms in the air, with their weapons still grasped in the death-clutch.

Then they fell, prone upon the sward, the fiery flames playing upon their painted faces, and set and soulless eyes.

CHAPTER IX.

ONCE MORE TO THE BREACH.

CHIOTA, with Bandera Bill, allowed their horses to proceed at an easier gait when they started on the back trail; for they knew that they could reach Bancroft Ranch much sooner than the Apaches under Big Panther, who would, to prevent discovery, be forced to travel in a roundabout course.

Their pace permitted conversation, and most certainly they had a subject to hand.

"By Heavens, Chiota!" exclaimed Bill; "matters are getting decidedly mixed. Who would have thought of that fiend, Lone Wolf, even upon receiving reinforcements, attacking our ranch again, after having lost nearly all his braves? If he is so bent upon revenge, why did he not send the new-comer to Forbes Ranch, if that is his destination, and return himself with those who have learned the approaches to, and know the exact location of our ranch, with all the advantageous points of attack?"

The Creek meditated a moment, striving to arrive at the main points and general meaning of his white pard. He then returned:

"Lone Wolf, he cunning like fox. Know braves who been at Bancroft Ranch think 'bad medicine' on that war-trail, so no good in fight. Apache in bearskin jump from log-lodge, run after war-party. Braves heap scare. Lone Wolf, he heap scare. Think Bad Spirit put 'bad medicine' on trail, make lose heap warriors."

"When get in old camp, up Medina, one brave he ride in camp. Say big bear on river bank been skinned. Then all say, no Bad Spirit."

Say he white man with skin on to scare Apache.

"Lone Wolf, he heap glad. Say shoot bearskin man when come. Soon come in camp from bush. Apache in bearskin, he see but no yell. Want get back to brother braves. Run fast in camp of Lone Wolf."

"Warriors shoot quick. Many arrows go in bearskin brave. He fall. Buckskin in mouth fly out. Sound death-howl. Apaches run. Cut bearskin off, then see brother brave."

"That bad, heap 'bad medicine,' for Apache shoot Apache. Bury quick. Put scalps in grave. Burn all arrows that shoot in brother brave."

"That heap more 'bad medicine.' Lone Wolf know braves no dare go back to Bancroft Ranch. Heap scare. So send Big Panther and warriors. They no see 'bad medicine.' Lone Wolf, he cunning like fox. So he think. Chiota laugh at Lone Wolf. Apache chief think Chiota no see trail of led mustangs. Bime-by Lone Wolf think Chiota cunning like fox. It is good."

"Then you saw them shoot the Apache that you sewed up in the bearskin, did you?"

"Chiota say see, did see. Lay in bush."

"And they consider it 'bad medicine' to have killed one of their own number by mistake, thinking it to be one of our men, who was gotten up to spy up, and frighten them?"

"My white brother's ears open. He talk like hear Chiota. It is good."

"Now I understand. But I should have supposed that the braves under Lone Wolf would have informed the new-comers of the strange events, and their heavy losses."

"Chiefs talk on war-path. Warriors tongues still."

"Well, that is a good idea. But I hope we shall have the satisfaction of giving Big Panther and his braves good cause to decide that the Medina is 'bad medicine' for Apaches."

"Poor Frank! He has, indeed, been called upon to suffer more than one in ten thousand. I trust the 'boys' will aid him and the people of Forbes Ranch, in defending his home against those fiends. Infuriated as they are by their losses, they will use all the cunning and strategy they can practice, to slay and capture."

"They have learned better, by their experience at our ranch than to charge on their mustangs, upon a Texan home, in bright moonlight."

"Good talk. My white brother, he great brave. Apaches leave mustangs in woods. Crawl like snakes in bushes."

"Yes, without doubt; and as, of course, it is impossible for Frank and the 'boys' to reach Forbes Ranch ahead of the Apaches, to warn his father, and prepare for defense, there seems to me to be little hope for the ranch and the Forbes family. By heavens, it is terrible to think of!"

"It will drive poor Frank insane, if his people are killed, and his home destroyed."

"Heap fool have 'bad medicine' on brain. Apache kill father, kill mother, steal all mustangs of Chiota. Chiota, he no sit down, like squaw, with 'rain of sorrow' on cheeks. No."

"Chiota sharpen knife. Go on war-trail. Sound war-cry, kill, scalp."

And the Creek chief circled his knife in the air, shot out his terrific whoop of war, and sped on as if he wished to have no more conversation with his white pard.

Much to the surprise of Bandera Bill, he found himself almost continually dwelling in thought on the Forbes family, and especially on Floss and Frank, although he had never met any of them except the latter.

Frio Frank had so often described his sister, and so graphically and particularly that his description had been the means of Bill's having created in his imagination a picture of the Frio maiden not unlike the reality, and that picture was often in his mind's eye.

But he excused himself for dwelling less upon the dangers that hovered over his own home and dear ones by the conclusion that there was little danger to be apprehended from the party of Big Panther.

To be forewarned was to be forearmed.

But Bandera Bill shuddered as he thought of the consequences that might have been had not the Creek chief discovered the Apaches dashing over the plain toward the Frio, and given warning of the same in time for them to reach the Hondo ford before it was too late for Chiota to find out, by the false trail, the division of the war-party.

In that event, without doubt, all at Bancroft Ranch would have been massacred except Dancing Fawn and poor Bertie, who would have been carried off to a fate, which, even to think of, gave him a deadly faintness.

As a matter of course, all at Bancroft Ranch were greatly surprised at seeing Bill and Chiota riding toward the bend, they having been discovered by one of the Mexicans, who was stationed at the entrance of the bend on guard.

All gathered on the veranda as the returning pair urged their horses to the same and dismounted.

Bill sprung forward and folded Bertie in his arms. He could see that her lovely face was stamped with extreme anxiety. At once he said:

"Frank and the boys have gone to the Frio to protect the ranch and his father, mother, and sister from the Apache wolves."

"Don't worry about him, Bertie; for we must take care of ourselves. We are not, by a long shot, out of danger."

Poor Bertie shuddered, but bore up bravely, awaiting her brother's explanation, which was made plain enough, however, by the Creek chief, who strode to the front of Dancing Fawn, and said in his characteristic way:

"When moon up high in sky, then hear Apache war-cries. Chiota, he come back. Squaw here. Bertie here. Bill here. So war-trail here."

Old Ben Bancroft stood, the very picture of joy and wonder at the return of his son.

"Well, Will," he said, "what's up now? Were you on a false scent? But, no—I'm sure Chiota made no mistake. He never does."

"Did Frank and the boys think they could defend the Frio ranch, or that you two were needed here?"

"Father," explained the young man, "we must prepare for another night of danger. Twenty-five Apaches, who were not with Lone Wolf in his raid here on the Medina, joined him on the plain, and have gone up the Hondo, to the hills. They will come down the river to-night, and attack us, while Lone Wolf proceeds to the Frio, to destroy and slay at Forbes Ranch."

"Now you know why we have returned."

"Merciful Heaven! Are these horrors never to end? It was a black day that I located here, and a blacker day when I brought our darling Bertie to this wild frontier."

"Heaven help us, and the Forbes family! For mercy's sake, Chiota, attend to the preparations for defense. Let the red fiends come. We'll give them a hot reception!"

The old ranchero paced back and forth on the veranda, in great agitation, casting frequent and anxious glances at Bertie and Will; while the latter strove to inspire his sister with hope, and allay her fears.

Romeo, his head still swathed in bandages, heard sufficient to make him hasten, and report the terrible tidings to his mother, Auntie Sue. The old woman dropped a turkey that she was preparing for the oven, upon the floor, the very instant that the word "Apaches" left Romeo's lips; her eyes starting from her head in terror.

She rushed forward near Bertie, while Romeo stood behind her, clutching her skirt, and Chunk was at his little master's heels, with bristling hair, his eyes darting suspicious glances at Chiota, not being able to decide positively between that friendly chief and the howling demons who had created such fearful excitement at Bancroft Ranch.

"Don't be alarmed, Auntie Sue," said Bill, reassuringly; "there is no danger at present; indeed there will not be until after midnight, and then we are, I hope, able to protect ourselves from the red raiders."

"But Chiota and I are hungry, and I hope you have some supper for us. Run back, Auntie, and shake up some grub as quick as you can."

"Ye're sho', Mars' Will, dar's none ob dem red debbils nigh der ranch?"

"None nearer than the Bandera Hills, Auntie Sue; so rest easy. You'll be in the ranch with Mis' Bertie hours before they arrive."

"Bress de Lawd! An' chile"—turning to Romeo—"don't yer leave yer mudder dis time. Pick up dat turkey, chile; Mars' Will an' dat Chiota Injun done want some grub!"

"I 'clar', hit do 'pear mighty strange 'bout a Injun bein' de savin' of we-uns from gittin' killed, an' hevin' our heads skunt by oder no-count Injuns. Hit jist upsots my old head ter think o' hit."

"I'll jist sot hit down, 'fore de good Lawd, dat Chiota am a white man what's painted hisself red. He's done bin sont ter dis ranch, ter save we-uns—I'm cl'ar sho' ob dat. Now, you mind!"

Romeo was too much occupied with dread imaginings, in connection with his past experiences with the Apaches, and fearful apprehensions of the possible horrors to come, to make

any comments as to the situation of affairs, past or in prospective; and he restored the turkey to his mother, and then crawled under the table, pillowing his bandaged head upon Chunk—the latter, accommodatingly, and sympathizingly lying down for this purpose.

After Bandera Bill and the Creek had satisfied their appetites, the Mexicans were stationed at the loop-holes, and all was made ready for a desperate defense of the ranch.

Then, Chiota, to the amazement of all, insisted that Bertie, Dancing Fawn, Auntie Sue, and Romeo, should be taken to the big tree, and placed in the "nest" of lariats, which had proved to be anything but a safe retreat at the time of the previous attack.

But the Creek had no doubts, apparently, on this occasion.

"Chiota say, Big Panther's Apaches no know where 'nest' in tree. Mebbe so shoot fire-arrows, burn ranch. Then Chiota, Bill, Mexicans, all run fast. Fight fast. No take care squaws. Squaws all get kill. Nest, he good."

Thus the chief reasoned.

And old Ben Bancroft and his son were forced, by these reasonings, to admit that he was right. His advice, therefore, was taken, the women being supplied with arms, with which to defend themselves.

Doubtless, Dancing Fawn would not again, after her past experience, descend the tree to reconnoiter.

But much trouble was had with Auntie Sue, who had not the slightest confidence in the security of the retreat in that huge tree by the river-bank; but she soon perceived that she would be left behind otherwise, so she hastily assented, calling frequently upon "de good Lawd" for protection.

Chiota recommended that the dog, Chunk, be shut up in the cook's cabin; but the little cur found its way to the tree, and was secretly carried up to the nest by Romeo.

All the females being thus, as was believed, in a secure position, Chiota, Bill, the old ranchero, and the three Mexicans proceeded to secure the doors and shutters, and then stationed themselves at the loop-holes; the Mexicans being posted in the east apartment, and the Bancrofts, father and son, with Chiota, in the west room, at which end of the building it was presumed the savages would begin the attack.

CHAPTER X.

HAD HE BEEN TOO LATE?

A FEARFUL picture it was that was presented to the horrified gaze of Frio Frank and the cowboys as they had thrust their rifles through the screen of foliage, and fired the volley that laid six of Lone Wolf's demon crew low in death.

The forked flames of the burning ranch shot upward, for all that Frank knew, devouring those so near and dear to him.

Had he arrived too late?

What, oh, what had occurred between those log walls since the first wild war-cries of the Apaches had nerved him and his comrades on tearing through the undergrowth, panting with exertion, and they saw the lurid light of the conflagration shooting here and there above their heads, and a red glow between the limbs of the towering trees and the tops of the undergrowth—who can imagine the anguish that racked Frank Forbes to the very soul, and caused the cowboys, with set teeth, to grip weapons more tightly as they strove to reach the scene of the hellish work of the red pirate of the Pecos.

Little hope was there in the breasts of the Texans as they saw that the ranch was a mass of flames, yet, as they perceived that the Apaches had taken no captives, apparently, except the three Mexicans whom they themselves had just rescued, there might be—but what?

As in one agonized glance the fiendish scene was opened before them, and they saw that there were no dead bodies opposite the blazing dwelling, then Frio Frank, Marker Mose, and the "boys," felt hope that the inmates of the ranch had escaped by the underground passage, the existence of which the young man had on the way revealed to those who were with him.

They knew at once that the Mexicans were yet living, or they would have been hacked and scalped by the main party of red marauders. The Greasers had evidently been captured for the torture-stake.

Such had been the great loss of life among the Apaches that Lone Wolf would take all the captives he could, in order that he might gratify his braves by scenes of torture, in which they could glut their thirst for revenge.

This was the decision of Frank, who knew well the character of the Apache chief.

The instant the Indians saw their comrades fall, they saw also, to their unbounded amazement, the six terrible avengers, with their fast-shooting guns in hand, and death in their flashing eyes.

At once a signal-yell shot from the throat of the frantically furious Lone Wolf, the intonation of which revealed the intensity of his baffled rage; and quick almost as lightning, a volley of steel-pointed shafts cut the air, glinting, as they whirled in their course, in the glare of the furious flames.

So unexpected and sudden was this volley fired,

the Texans being bent on closing in with the red foe, and bending every nerve and muscle to that end, that they were not prepared to avoid the shafts by falling to the earth, or to confuse the aim of the foe by a fusillade from their revolvers. The consequence was that two of the cowboys fell mortally wounded, the deadly arrows piercing their breasts, feather deep.

Indeed, not one of the little party of whites escaped either being wounded, or having their clothing pierced.

But the survivors, led by Frio Frank, bounded onward, with vengeful yells.

As an echo to the yells of agony that came from the two cowboys, when the steel-pointed shafts pierced through and through their vitals, out rang the instantaneous discharge of four revolvers. But the Apaches, who expected this, and who had all sprung at once toward the timber as their bowstrings twanged, fell flat to the earth, thus escaping.

As quickly did the warriors bound to their feet, and dash for cover; running in a serpentine course, to avoid the expected shower of leaden balls.

A perfect volley followed the first, and two more of the fiends of the Pecos, with dead-bowls, sunk to the earth; leaving Lone Wolf with but ten braves—more than half of the number with which he had left the Rio Medina, to avenge the heavy losses he had there sustained, having been slain.

Little wonder that, as these warriors dashed into the dark shadows, they were forced to believe that "bad medicine" had followed them from the Medina.

Lone Wolf was frantic with baffled rage but he realized that he was in a most desperate position; on account of the Texans being between his braves and their mustangs.

And, as the Texans, who he knew had, in some mysterious manner, reached the Frio from the Medina—for he recognized Frio Frank—unnoticed on the back trail, had burst from the west side of the clearing; this caused the Apache chief to be greatly worried, he thinking it probable that they had discovered the mustangs of his party. If so, they had cut the animals loose, and stampeded them.

Their relief, however, was intense, as they rushed into a small "open," to discover a dozen horses secured to limbs, and fully equipped.

When the red braves ran their hands over the frame and limbs of these animals, that snorted in fright, and sprung away from them, they were doubly excited; for, at once, they realized that they had accidentally discovered a very fine lot of fresh steeds, that would bear them away from the vicinity faster than their own fatigued mustangs, or the horses the Texans had ridden from the Rio Medina.

Notwithstanding the loss of more than half his little war party since reaching the Frio, the Apache chief now began to realize that there was a sprinkling of "good medicine" on his war-trail.

First, he had no doubt that all the people of the ranch, except the three Mexicans—all of Frio Frank's people—had been burned alive in the log-lodge; for it would have been impossible for a human being to exist inside the building many moments, after the frantic rush of the Greasers from it.

This was a grand triumph, and a suitable revenge upon Frio Frank.

The home and people of the young scout had been swept from the earth.

Frank had arrived too late, but he had arrived in the very nick of time to suit Lone Wolf. It was the moment that the Apache chief most desired. The young Texan had beheld the conflagration at a stage when it was impossible for living beings to be within the doomed dwelling!

The anguish of Frio Frank must be terrible.

This was most gratifying to Lone Wolf.

Besides this, his braves had slain two of the Texans, and wounded others. And, to cap the climax, the Apaches had, in their flight, been led by the spirits of their fathers, direct to the concealed horses.

That these animals had been equipped, and therefore fit by the people of the ranch, for the purpose of escape, the chief was confident; and this proved that the people of Frio Frank could not have escaped from the burning dwelling.

Taking all these things into consideration, Lone Wolf felt that he had much upon which to congratulate himself.

So, late it was he, that he hesitated but a moment, deciding to inspect the clearing and the burning building from a point near the river; and thus endeavor to surprise, and kill or capture the remaining Texans.

Could he but capture Frank, his Frio war-trail would be a complete success; and the presence of the young scout and the cowboys gratified him much for it proved that his ruse had worked well—that by having exposed his little war party on the plain, he had, as he expected and hoped drawn away a large portion of the defenders of Bancroft Ranch.

This would probably insure the success of Big Panther, in burning the ranch, killing the inmates, and securing Bandera Bill for the torture.

That Chiota was not with Frio Frank's party, however looked suspicious. It indicated that both the Creek and Bill, perhaps with others had returned to the Medina, upon finding that the war-party had divided, and one half gone up the Hondo.

This seemed probable, as Lone Wolf believed both Chiota and Bandera Bill would have accompanied Frio Frank to defend the home of the latter, if they had not had good grounds to believe that another attack was meditated upon Bancroft Ranch.

No sooner did this thought occur to the Apache

chief, than he resolved, as he had discovered the "bonanza," in the shape of a dozen finely equipped horses, to make an effort to capture Frio Frank, and then dash headlong to the Rio Medina; as he knew he could, upon such fresh horses, reach that river at a very favorable time to make an attack, and which time might be chosen by Big Panther.

Thus having laid out his line of action, the Apache chief ordered four of his warriors to guard the horses, bidding the remaining six to follow him as stealthily as serpents.

Thus were the cruel fates influencing both whites and reds toward a common point—toward a meeting that would cause terrible torture of mind—leading Texans and Apaches to a point which was destined to be the scene of a most tragic struggle; for Lone Wolf and his braves proceeded to the very spot with the object of reconnoitering the burning ranch and the clearing below.

This was the exit from the underground passage by which the people of Forbes Ranch were escaping from their burning home.

And the Texans, Frio Frank in the lead, and he nearly prostrated by fatigue, privation from food and sleep, and agony of soul, were also proceeding cautiously within the border of the undergrowth to the same point, hoping and praying that the unfortunate people of the ranch were now in the tunnel.

CHAPTER XI.

FRANK AND FLOSS.

The six Apache braves and their chief reached a point on the bank of the river, at the swell of the bend, where a belt of low bushes screened them from view. The whole building was now one immense pile of flame.

Somewhat to the surprise of the Indians, the four Texans were not to be seen. Their absence seemed to indicate that they had stolen into the shades in search of their foes. This caused some uneasiness to Lone Wolf and the warriors who were with him, although they were confident that the Texans knew nothing about the horses they had discovered.

Indeed, it was impossible that they should.

As this thought occurred to the Apache chief, one of the Mexicans, who had been rescued and left lying where their red captors had been shot down, raised himself to a sitting posture and gazed in a bewildered manner at his seemingly dead comrades. The heat was now strong, and as the Greaser began gradually to realize the near and frightful past, he made the sign of the cross and staggered to his feet.

Instantly, upon perceiving him, the hideous face of Lone Wolf contorted more hideously, and he at once ordered two of his braves to steal around the border of the clearing and knife the Mexicans, secure their scalps, and drag their own slain comrades into the thicket to be buried before the hated Texans could scalp them.

The two braves designated by Lone Wolf at once proceeded to crawl cautiously on their mission. The remaining four braves and Lone Wolf, though anxious for their safety, had their attention soon drawn to another quarter; one from which they had expected no alarm nor any evidence of enemies. What they saw filled the demons with murderous joy and exultation.

They first heard the slight rustling of the vines on the steep bank directly behind them, and a little below their crouching place.

At this spot the moon shone down upon the waters of the Rio Frio, but it was some time, nevertheless, before the Apaches could discern the occasion of the movement among the vines.

They believed that the Texans had become frightened after the loss of two of their number, and had secreted themselves, hoping that from the place of their concealment, they could get a shot at their enemies. Not for a moment, did they suppose it to have any connection with those who had been in the ranch.

Consequently, great was the astonishment of the savages, when they beheld the head of the old ranchero, whom they had chased over the prairie, and who had shot down two of their brother braves, projecting from the curtain of vines. Then they detected the sound of whispering.

At once, the Indians decided that the ranch must have been built over a subterranean passage, the entrance to which was beneath the log-lodge, and the exit at the river-bank.

If this was the case, and there seemed no other explanation, then there was little doubt in regard to all the inmates of the dwelling having escaped death. This must have been it, for otherwise they would have rushed out, and braved a far less torturing death, than that at by fire.

The eyes of the red fiends glittered, as they now gazed over the prospect before them.

Only for a moment was the head of Mr. Forbes free from the vines. Then it disappeared, but the next his arm was seen boldly tearing them away, and then with his daughter supported by the other arm, he descended toward the water, some six feet below; it being impossible to surmount the bank, as it slightly overhung the river at that point.

Then Mrs. Forbes peeped out from the exit of the tunnel, and the cries of the negro children, and the scolding of their mothers became audible.

With a few gestures to his braves, Lone Wolf, with knife in hand, stood ready.

A most terrible revenge was within his power, a fiendish one!

It was evident that those in the underground passage had heard the reports of the rifles, and believed that the red marauders had been driven away, or they would not have ventured out, especially in so careless a manner.

Knife in hand, the Apache chief sprung down

upon the shoulders of the ranchero; the piercing shriek of poor Floss Forbes changing to a gurgling cry, as she was clutched by Lone Wolf, and the arm of her father was wrenched from her side.

Then the brutal captor, and his fair captive, sunk beneath the surface of the Rio Frio!

That cry was the signal for a startling change of scene upon the bank and in the waters, on side of the bend downward of the hideous chief. The weight of Lone Wolf forced old man Forbes far beneath the surface, in an almost paralyzed condition, both mentally and physically.

The horror of the ranchero, as he struggled feebly beneath the waters, was most excruciating.

In another instant, one of the braves sprung after his chief, grasping as he shot downward the horror-stricken Mrs. Forbes; but just then, with loud cries of vengeance, Frio Frank, Marker Mose, and the two cowboys, bounded forward upon the trio of Apaches, who were leaning over the bank.

Frank left the reds to the mercy of the cowboys, who rushed upon them with gleaming bows.

Poor Frank had arrived but a few minutes too late, to make a daring attempt to prevent the destruction of his home; and now it seemed it had been but a few seconds too late to save his darling sister, for Floss was nowhere to be seen!

The waters of the river, the current on the north side being slow, were greatly agitated at two points; and the reader may faintly imagine the agony of suspense that followed this discovery by the young man, for he knew that it was occasioned by human beings beneath the surface.

With bowie clutched, he stood ready for a bound into the river.

Soon the pallid face of his father met his view—the old man gasping for breath, and struggling as if wounded.

Frank with a cry that was heart-piercing, was about to make a spring to the assistance of his father; when, to his horror, two more faces broke the water, a little nearer the bank.

No wonder was Frank's emotion mingled with overpowering anxiety; for one face was that of his mother, apparently more dead than living, while, grasping her by the hair, his right arm being thrust upward, with long knife clutched for murderous blow, was a hideous Apache!

But a moment passed while Frank gazed down at the disturbed waters, but it seemed to him an hour. No sooner, however, had the young Texan fully realized the scene, than, panther-like, he leaped out, with arms extended; and, striking the water with a foot of the exultant, but now cumbered Indian, the scout tore the arm of the red fiend from its clutch upon his mother, and at the same time buried his knife in the Apache's throat.

The latter caught wildly at his white foe, and both, in desperate encounter, sank beneath the surface.

Meanwhile the three cowboys had been having a fierce knife conflict with the trio of braves upon whom they had sprung but a moment previous to the leap of Frio Frank into the river.

Two desperately fighting couples fell over the bank into the stream; but one pair remained on terra firma, and the cowboy soon dispatched his red opponent.

Ere long Frank arose to the surface, when he caught a sight of his mother clinging to the vines on the bank; and then of his father, who was slowly and feebly struggling to gain the bank lower down. Then a blow from a hatchet of an Indian, who had just slain his cowboy antagonist, shut off all sense, and all consciousness.

At a signal from Lone Wolf, the form of the brave young Texan was shoved down-stream, and in behind the screen of vines.

This last act was not observed by the cowboy on the bank, nor by his pard in the stream—the latter now held in the death-grip of his red opponent.

More terrible and rapidly changing scenes have rarely been witnessed.

The cowboy on the bank threw a lasso to his comrade, who secured it beneath the arms of Mrs. Forbes; and then, the boy in the water struck out down-stream to assist the old ranchero. But he never knew how near he was to death, as he swam past the covert of Lone Wolf and his brave, with the captive brother and sister.

Realizing that they must at once escape, Lone Wolf, and the warrior with him, slowly floated along the bank, hidden by the drooping reeds and vines, until they found a place easy of ascent. Then they dragged their captives upward, bound their arms behind them, and the brave departed. He soon returned, however, leading two of the equipped braves.

The captive pair were at once placed upon these animals, one upon each, and Lone Wolf and the brave sprang up behind them, supporting the unconscious Floss and Frank. The braves were at once urged forward through the wood, until the other animals and the guard that had been left over them, were reached.

While this had been going on, the Mexican who had recovered was dispatched by the Indian who first observed him; and his two senseless comrades were made senseless forever by the drives of a cowardly pair of Apaches. The scalps of all three were then torn from their heads.

These now joined their chief, at a guttural order from whom they and the others vaulted into saddles; the horses which were not needed, being led along. In this way Lone Wolf galloped away, on his return to the Rio Medina, with two captives; one, the fairest maiden on the Frio, and the other her brave and noble brother.

No sadder, or more deplorable condition could two mortals be placed in.

They believed their father and mother to have

been killed, and they knew that, if not rescued, a terrible death awaited them.

So intense and overpowering were the feelings of Frank and Floss Forbes that they found no words with which to express themselves, although the language of the eye was practiced between them.

Utterly broken in spirit, and hopeless, was Frio Frank; more from the privations through which he had passed, than anything else.

Poor Floss knew but too well that there was little hope of rescue, notwithstanding the small number of braves who held them.

The two cowboys who survived, one of whom was Marker Moss, succeeded in getting Mr. and Mrs. Forbes out from the river, in safety.

But it almost appeared that it would have been a mercy had they died, rather than suffer what they must in connection with the fate of their children.

Marker Moss, dashing out from the bend, discovered the Apache chief, his five braves and two captives. Then returning, the ranchero and his wife were conducted to one of the gro cabins.

The slaves were all brought safely out from the tunnel and instructed to care for their master and mistress.

Then, after burying the bodies of their slain comrades, Marker Moss and his one remaining "boy" galloped at full speed on the trail of Lone Wolf, which, they were rejoiced to find, led back toward the Medina, they keeping within sight of the Apaches and their captives, whom Marker swore should be rescued, even should the fiendish pirates of the plains succeed in crossing the Rio Pecos with Frank and Floss.

Let us hope that now, as he had ever done before, the brave cowboy will keep his oath.

CHAPTER XII. WHAT CHIOTA SAW.

Hours after hour passed at Bancroft Ranch, and there had been no indications of the approach of the red marauders.

During the earlier portion of the night Bander Bill threw himself upon a couch and fell into a heavy slumber, which, indeed, he stood greatly in need of. But it seemed that the Creek chief never indulged in sleep, unless it might be occasionally, in a standing position, while at the loop-hole.

Once, at the earnest solicitation of old Ben Bancroft, he stole away to ascertain if everything was right at the "nest" in the tree. As he reached it, without hearing the slightest sound that could have come from the retreat, the little dog growled low and threateningly, as though well posted in regard to the necessity of not causing any disturbance.

But Chiunk seemed to realize that Chiota was a friend, and at a low word of caution from the Creek hushed growling. Our red friend was not one to notice a dog, however, and he returned without his visit having been known to the occupants of the covert in the tree.

There side by side, all wrapped in deep, Heaven-sent slumber, were a golden-haired maiden, a beautiful Indian woman of nearly the same age, an aged and wrinkled negro, and a ragged little black boy, while, sitting upon the breast of the latter was an ugly and diminutive cur, its bright eyes darting suspicious glances around the shades, and then gazing down upon the sleeping human beings, with an air of curious responsibility as guardian of their slumbers and their safety.

Slowly and funereal like swayed the ghostly moss, depending in long festoons from every limb; and silver arrows of moonlight shot down one brighter than the rest playing upon the gold-crowned head and angel face of Bertie Bancroft, the belle of the bend.

A strange and striking picture it all made, and more so to one who knew the circumstances which brought that quartette of human beings thus together—all equal now in the slumber that bound them, all equal in the dread danger that threatened them.

The old ranchero was greatly relieved and pleased, at being informed that the occupants of the "nest" were sleeping; which, considering the pain, privation and anguish they had suffered, was not to be wondered at.

Morpheus had touched their lids with his wand, and banished the torturing thoughts and terrors from their minds.

Bander Bill awoke, the dangers of the night pressing too heavily upon his brain to be banished by sleep; and he too, was relieved greatly by the report brought in by Chiota from the sleepers in the tree.

As midnight passed, the Creek, no longer able to control himself within the log-lodge, stole out, and crawled stealthily toward the entrance of the bend, to a point from which he could gain a view of the far-stretching southern plain, and to the west, along the timber line of the Rio Medina.

But the chief went not to the border of the undergrowth. Instead of doing so, he stole up into the branches of a towering tree, which grew on the outer edge of the timber line. He deigned not to gaze out upon the plain until he had reached a considerable elevation; not stopping until he had gained the uppermost branches, where but little foliage obstructed the view.

Then from the lips of Chiota came an ejaculation, that expressed the very extreme of amazement, not devoid of concern.

It was not without good cause, for away toward the horizon he beheld a squad of night-riders—light in number—all speeding, like the wind, toward the Medina, and aiming as if they expected to strike the bottom timber but a short distance above the bend.

It required but a short, though close and keen scrutiny, for the Creek chief to decide that six of the eight night-riders were Apaches; and that two were white people—one, evidently, a female.

Again the ejaculation burst from the lips of Chiota, expressing intense concern, apprehension, and astonishment.

Then his gaze was attracted far in the rear of this party, to a single horseman, speeding on after those he had first observed.

He lingered barely long enough to convince him that the solitary horseman was a white man. Then he hastily descended.

The chief concluded that Lone Wolf had lost all his braves but five; but, that he had taken two captives, a man and a woman.

Were these Frio Frank and his sister? It appeared more than probable.

Far away, toward the south, Chiota, as he gained a clear view in his descent, detected the glow of a conflagration. Then he felt sure that he knew the main points in connection with the attack on Forbes Ranch.

He believed that Lone Wolf had set fire to the ranch on the Frio, but that a desperate fight had followed, resulting in the slaying of nearly all of the Apaches; the survivors, however, having taken two captives.

Chiota came to the conclusion, also, that the lone rider, apparently in pursuit, must be Frio Frank; now dashing, in desperation and alone, to the rescue of some of his people.

If this was true, a dash must be made, to assist Frank in the rescue; even though Bancroft Ranch should be left to the mercy of the Apaches.

The Creek was almost certain that the war-party, under Big Panther, were stealing stealthily down through the timber, toward the ranch; and that they were not aware of the near presence of what he believed to be the remnant of Lone Wolf's war-party.

The movements of the chief were more than usually rapid, after he had reached these conclusions; and, in five minutes, he bounded upon the veranda at the ranch, and into the west apartment—the door having been unbarred and opened for him by Bander Bill.

"My white brother get mustang—Chiota get mustang. Quick. Ride fast. So many Apaches on plain"—indicating six, with extended fingers.

"Ride fast from Frio. Have so many captives"—extending two fingers—"one squaw. Must rescue. Chiota think Frio Frank ride fast after Apaches."

"Chiota not go, Bander Bill not go. Frio Frank lose scalp. Sister gone, father gone, both torture. Ugh! It is bad."

"Mexicans stay at ranch. My brother's father stay at ranch. Apache no find ranch. Mebbe so too late. Go el!"

"Great Heavens! What next?" cried out Bander Bill. "Father, we must ride to the rescue. The remnant of Lone Wolf's war-party, as I understand Chiota, are galloping over the prairie with two captives—son of them a woman—and a white man in pursuit. If they join Big Panther the captives are lost; and poor Frank will throw his life away, in attempting the rescue by himself. You see how it is, father."

"Leave the Mexicans to guard the ranch, and do you go to the tree, and remain with poor Bertie. The ranch is not to be put in the balance with the lives of those poor captives. Do as I advise, father! I will!"

With these words Bander Bill dashed out upon the veranda, ordered the Mexicans into the west apartment, and then rushed to the corral, whither the Creek had preceded him.

In another minute both Chiota and Bill were mounted and galloping toward the entrance to the bend.

"Come in bush quick. No let Apache see. Mebbe so kill captives. That bad heap."

Thus advised, Bill saw the prudence of acting upon it—even the necessity, when the lives of the captives were considered.

At once, upon hearing the report of Chiota, Bander Bill's mind was made up.

He was almost positive, although he could give no reason or explanation why, that one of the captives in the power of the Apaches was Floss Forbes, the beautiful sister of his prairie pard.

The whole nature of young Bancroft was stirred, and he became braced up with new strength and resolution, determined to rescue Floss even though a dozen Apache demons stood between them.

The course pursued, as advised by Chiota, was the only way of proceeding that was open to the daring pair, but it was to them a most dangerous course, as they might at any moment be surprised by the lurking braves of Big Panther's party, who must at that late hour have gained a position near the ranch.

But they repudiated all dangers.

At times they peered out upon the plain, and saw the six hideous Apaches with the two captives. Eventually, they recognized Lone Wolf.

The next glance revealed Frio Frank fast bound to the horse he bestrode; and besides, bound fast to another mustang, was a young and beautiful maiden.

The two men were now instilled with the strength and determination of ten.

Their eyes flashed fury.

Both fully realized that life and death depended upon the skill and rapidity of their movements, and the choice of time they made in which to make the attempt at rescue.

The lone rider on the plain they now perceived to be Marker Moss.

One fact our two friends could see was in their favor.

There were but two Indians in the rear of the captives and those in advance were fully fifteen yards ahead of them and riding at full speed toward the shades, as if a moment too long on that exposed plain might balk their plans, seal their doom, and be the means of their losing their captives.

With the greatest caution Chiota urged his horse to a point beyond his companion; thus one of the rescuers was on each side of that particular spot toward which the Apaches were now heading.

They were riding with the evident intention of dashing directly into the timber, and without entertaining the slightest suspicion of the presence of enemies in that quarter.

It was evident they feared that Marker Moss, whom they knew to be in close pursuit, would yell, or perhaps shoot; thus jeopardizing their safety, by attracting attention, and bringing assistance from Bancroft Ranch.

With revolvers gripped, and at full cock, the daring pair in the undergrowth—their bridle-reins in their left hands, and their limbs drawn, ready to drive spurs; their senses as well as their muscles strained for the desperate attempt to prevent the red demons from luring their lives in the breasts of their captives at the first sight of white foes—thus were Bander Bill, and Chiota, the Creek, positioned.

Soon, headlong, upon panting and foam-flecked mustangs, the hideous Apache chief, Lone Wolf, and his paint-daubed braves, with flaunting feathers and wildly-flying hair, exultation stamped upon their fiendish faces, dashed directly toward them; while in the midst of the horde of serpent-eyed savages, were the two captives.

There sat Frank and Floss in their saddles, bound, and pallid as death; hopeless despair and anguish that was terrible to witness, being stamped upon their features.

It required but one glance for Bander Bill.

One look into the face of Floss—whom he now saw for the first time—and the young man would rather have lost a dozen lives than see her thus in such mental and physical suffering.

One look, and he knew that, God spare their lives, Floss Forbes would rule his heart and soul forever!

Ye gods! How the muscles and nerves drew and twitched, in the frame of Bander Bill; his teeth grinding, and a strength that was herculean seeming to have been given him by the sight before him!

Nerved thus, no score of braves could have stood the charge of those two magnificently-formed and determined men.

CHAPTER XIII.

"THEIR BUT TO DO OR DIE."

With no abatement of speed, the three Apache braves and Lone Wolf dashed toward the shades. Had they been able to do so, they would have jerked jaw-strap, believing that whatever they might do to defend themselves would be useless—that the glittering tubes held in the hands of their skillful foes would leech out death to all in a moment's time.

And, indeed, this would have been the case had not the captives been just in the rear.

But even the keen gaze of the Apaches could detect nothing, so on they dashed.

Then came a transformation in that savage scene. At the same instant both Chiota and Bander Bill shot out from the undergrowth.

With a crashing of bush and branch, men and mustangs darted. Chiota past Lone Wolf, and Bill past the brave who was on the other and outer end of the line of leading Apaches.

Straight toward the heads of the horses to which the captives were bound darted the daring rescuers with leveled revolvers.

Twin spurts of fire, a loud detonation that echoed through the timber, and the death-bowls burst from the throats of both the rear braves, as they sank over the hams of their mustangs.

All this took but a moment.

Then followed a desperate struggle on the part of the rescuers to bring to halt the mustangs upon which were the captives in the last possible space of time, for they realized that the next moment might end their lives, as the four Apaches were in their rear. A powerful pull at the jaw-strap brought both animals around suddenly, and then came a quick flash of knives, and Frank and Floss were free.

The Creek chief placed the jaw-strap and a revolver in the almost nerveless hands of his rescued white brother; but Bander Bill saw that the beautiful maiden whom he had released from cruel bonds was losing all consciousness, and he instantly caught her and drew her before him in his saddle.

Not a word had been spoken.

The time for accomplishing this dangerous and carefully-arranged and executed plan had been chosen at the very instant to insure success, as described, for, as our two friends darted out from the undergrowth, Lone Wolf and his three braves shot into the same with great speed and momentum, causing it to be an impossibility for the stately savages to halt and at once extricate themselves from the thick undergrowth.

They each had caught a glimpse of the two horsemen, as they had dashed past them, and had recognized them both; which fact not only gave them great concern, fearing they would be shot in their backs, but decided them that their captives would be rescued.

The reports of the two revolvers, and the death-hoofs of their two comrade braves were proof positive of the loss of the captives, yet up to this

time no sound came from the lips of the four Apaches.

But soon the terrible war-whoop of Lone Wolf rung through the wood, drowning the echo of the death-hoofs, and this was followed by the whoops of the three braves.

Then the dark shades seemed to be swarming with Apaches as whoop followed whoop, here and there, from many throats; but up the river, some distance from the scene of the rescue, was all this heard.

The fury of the savage chief was terrible. Fierce rallying cries were sent out by him, as he urged his mustang forward.

Speeding headlong out upon the moonlit plain was Chiota, his taunting war-cry sounding with exultant inonation, while beside him galloped Frio Frank and Bandera Bill, the latter holding Floss in his arms.

The two captives, that it had cost Lone Wolf twenty warriors to secure, had been torn from him, when he was within a few arrow-flights of the war-party of Big Panther.

As he galloped madly in pursuit, in his ungovernable rage, the rescuers and rescued were joined by another Texan, who had evidently come from the burned ranch on the Frio. Lone Wolf halted suddenly, perceiving that to attempt to regain his captives and avenge the death of so many of his braves, would be but to hang his own scalp on the belt of the detested Creek chief.

But a moment's reflection decided the Apache leader that revenge most gratifying was yet within his power.

Big Panther, with his five and twenty warriors, was near at hand.

The Texans and Chiota were swerving in their course and circling toward the bend.

Lone Wolf swore by the spirits of his fathers, that the ranch should be the food of fire; and that all who escaped the flames should be put to the torture except the Creek squaw, the sister of Bandera Bill, and any other females who might be found there. These should be his slaves for a time, and then their scalps should decorate his war shield.

No sooner did the Apache thus decide than, with a signal to his three braves to follow, he sped dark toward the timber and disappeared in the dark shades. Then all became still in the somber bottom-land, along the Rio Medina.

Yet, amid those deep shadows were many hideous forms, all stealing down-stream toward Bancroft Ranch, and the vengeful Lone Wolf was in the midst of them—all bent on destruction and death.

Not a word had passed between Chiota and Frio Frank, or between the latter and Bandera Bill; but glancing behind them they discovered that the Apaches had given up the idea of pursuit, which they had hoped would have been maintained; and to encourage which they had struck out upon the open plain, hoping there to make a stand and to slay the scourge of the Texas border—the demon torturer of women and babes, the master fiend, Lone Wolf!

The whoops of the Apaches under Big Panther, however, warned our friends that they were far from being safe; indeed, they realized that the time was near at hand, which would decide the fate of Bancroft Ranch, and of all those who had been connected with it during the tragic drama of the last two days and nights.

So extremely complicated had affairs become, that all were, for a time, greatly perplexed and worried.

The Mexicans were in the ranch, or were supposed to be; and it was not known whether old Ben Bancroft had gone, as he had been advised or directed to do, to the covert in the tree—there to protect the females, and to be in a safer position himself.

The Greasers must be saved, if possible.

The "nest" in the tree was liable to be discovered, as the whoops of the Apaches betrayed the fact that they were scattered in every direction, and searching the bottom-land with the greatest care.

Some slight noise, the very slightest, might betray the presence of human beings in the branches of the huge tree.

Auntie Sue, or Romeo, might catch a glimpse of a painted face in some bar of moonlight below in the undergrowth, and cry out in alarm; thus betraying their presence.

Great, indeed, would be the triumph of Lone Wolf, at securing the golden-haired maiden, Bertie Bancroft, to say nothing of Dancing Fawn, the squaw of his most hated foe, Chiota, the Creek.

Not only this, but they now had with them, Floss Forbes, the beautiful sister of Frio Frank; and no secure retreat, in which they could place her.

Frio Frank was recovering his wonted strength and vim, since he had found himself to be free, and his darling sister safe; but he had, through seeing Floss bound to a horse beside him, and doomed to a fate too fearful to contemplate—together with the thoughts of his father and mother, both struggling in the waters of the Rio Frio; and, for all he knew, dead, mutilated, and scalped by the red demons—all this had been more than poor Frank could well bear, even had he been his usual self to begin with.

But privation from food, rest, and sleep, had prostrated him; to say nothing of the torture of body and anguish of soul, he had endured for days and nights.

Hope had, however, been born in his breast, when he saw the daring dash of his prairie pards, Chiota and Bandera Bill; and, upon being set free, and realizing that Floss was free also, and with a tolerable chance for escape—then Frank had braced himself, rubbed his bruised and swollen wrists and

ankles, pouring water freely upon them. Whisky was also furnished by the Creek chief, from canteens, which he had, with most commendable forethought, brought from the ranch.

As for Bandera Bill, his every nerve was vibrating with an ecstatic happiness, as deep as it was heavenly; and such as he had never dreamed possible for a human being to experience.

He gazed into the upturned face of Floss Forbes, with an adoration that was most worshipful in his eyes.

It was thus that the young man wished he might be fated to gallop through life, with that fair form in his arms.

So bent was he upon contemplating the pale but most lovely face before him, and dreaming of the possible happiness in store for him, should he be so fortunate as to win the maiden's love, that he did not pay the slightest attention to his surroundings; even being, at times, oblivious of the dangers that were ahead, or the fearful scenes that had been so recently passed.

But soon he was brought to a realization of the necessity for immediate action, as were his comrades also.

Chiota had given one of his revolvers to Frio Frank; and, as the war-party had retreated into the shades, our friends now galloped toward Bancroft Ranch, at headlong speed.

CHAPTER XIV.

ONE MORE HORROR IN RESERVE.

BEFORE reaching the entrance to the bend, Bandera Bill, Frio Frank, Chiota and Marker Mose, agreed to signal the Mexicans, and give them to understand that they had better abandon the ranch, than remain, and be in danger of being massacred in an attempt to fly from the building; after it had been fired by the Indians.

Since it was now known to Bill and Chiota that Forbes Ranch had been burned to the ground, they had no doubt, since Lone Wolf had now joined Big Panther, that an attack somewhat the same in character would be attempted at Bancroft Ranch.

Indeed there could be little question that an attempt would be made to fire the ranch, which would undoubtedly be successful.

Frio Frank's mind had been greatly relieved, by the report made by Marker Mose of the rescue of his father and mother; but he knew they must both be suffering the most excruciating anguish, being aware that he and Floss were in the power of the fiend who had destroyed their home.

The sufferings which poor Floss Forbes had undergone, previous to her rescue, had been too much for both brain and body; and she had sunk into a semi-comatose state, from which Bandera Bill had found it impossible to revive her.

So desperate was the situation, that but a little time had been spared in the effort to do so; Frank assuring his much alarmed friend that Floss would revive soon, that she was in no danger of death. For Bill's manner and expression of face seemed to imply that this was what he feared.

The consequence was that the maiden still lay limp and senseless, in the arms of Bandera Bill, when a light reached the entrance to the bend; Frio Frank not offering to relieve Bill of his fair burden, as he believed his part was at that time more capable of protecting Floss than he was. Besides, he read in Bill's face, the new-born love that ruled the brave young Texan's heart, and indeed his whole being.

Frio Frank had so recently "been there himself," that he easily comprehended matters, and was much more pleased than otherwise with the way they were shaping.

Even amid the surrounding dangers, and the possibility that all might be murdered within the hour, the newly-aroused emotions of the two young men could not be banished, even for a moment; and these nerved them to do everything, and brave everything, in the defense of those whom they loved, even unto almost certain death; for life would be worse than death to them without those angel maidens to walk beside them along life's trail.

"Bandera Bill, ride fast in wood. There"—pointing down the river—"take sister of Frio Frank. Hide in dark woods."

"Chiota, Marker Mose, Frio Frank, we get Mexicans. Lay in bush, side ranch. There"—indicating the eastern border of the bend—"when Apache come, shoot fast. Mebbe so run in woods. Mebbe so stay, fight. It is good. Come!"

Thus spoke the Creek chief, urging his horse in the direction of the ranch, followed by Marker Mose; Frio Frank lingering to give one look of concern at the corpse-like face of his sister.

"So long, Bill!" he said. "Chiota's plan is a good one. We may be able to save the ranch. Steal to the river and hide. Take care of yourself, old pard; and may the good Lord take care of us all!"

"All right, Frank! Never fear for me. I'll defend Floss with my latest breath. I do hope Bertie and the other females are safe. I must try and gain a position near their hiding-place."

Thus the two young men parted.

Bill dashed, with his fair burden, into the shades, and Frank spurred on after Chiota.

The latter were overtaken by Marker Mose, near the veranda.

As they approached the ranch, the three Greasers within opened the door of the west apartment quickly; and stood, looking at those upon whom they believed their lives depended, for they had heard the war-cries of the Apaches, and feared the worst.

They immediately, and with eager and joyous haste, followed the new-comers into the dark shades

just at the west end of the ranch, and but half a pistol-shot distant from it.

To the anxious inquiries of all, the Mexicans reported, that their employer had followed Chiota's directions, and joined the women in their retreat.

This greatly relieved the minds of all.

Our friends quickly dismounted, leading their horses into a dense thicket some distance from the border of the timber. They then returned, all crouching in a line, and peering out into the open bend, and upon the ranch.

All was still, except the usual sounds of the night—the hum of insects, and the occasional hoot of an owl, shriek of panther, or distant yelping of coyote.

The door had been shut by the Greasers, and the ranch might be filled with men, for all the Apaches knew to the contrary.

The Indians knew that the people of the ranch had been warned of their presence by the whoops of war, that had been prematurely called forth by the yells of Lone Wolf and his braves, at the time of the rescue of Frank and Floss.

But the approach to the ranch, for all that, must be secret and silent.

The reverses and wholesale death that had overtaken the war-party of Lone Wolf had been astounding, and caused the practice of great prudence by the braves under Big Panther, who had read the "sign" at the abandoned camp of Lone Wolf, and throughout the bottom timber.

But a more determined and bloodthirsty party of red-men were never on a trail together; and Lone Wolf incited them on, he being resolved to avenge his losses at any cost.

Yet, just as daring and determined were the gallant defenders of the ranch.

Throughout all this, the females, with the exception of Dancing Fawn, slumbered in the "nest" so soundly, that old Ben Bancroft had reached them and lain down without awakening any one; he, too, in a short time, falling into a deep slumber, which even the war-whoops in the distance did not disturb.

Chunk, the little cur, manifested great delight upon the arrival of the ranchero; and the presence of the dog gave the old man more confidence, he feeling that Chunk would permit no enemies to approach without giving the alarm.

Thus were all our friends situated.

Thus, as described, was their condition; those who slept being providentially free, for the time being, from the anxiety, apprehension, and fatigue, which had made them so miserable for so many hours.

But, not long were the watchers that crouched in the border of the undergrowth on the eastern side of the bend—not long were they to wait, after thus secreting themselves; for soon a half-dozen arrows darted from the branches of the towering trees on the west side of the bend—each arrow having bound to its shaft a bunch of blazing dry grass, which had been rubbed with the gum of the mesquite.

These arrows all struck with dull thuds into the dry cedar shingles of the roof of Bancroft Ranch. But a great, a most astounding surprise, awaited those who sent from their bows these fire-arrows.

The keen eyes of the lurkers in the thickets had been watching the shades, and the first glow of fire-light which had betrayed the presence of the Apaches caused a hiss to be given by the Creek chief, which drew all eyes to the point of interest—there soon being as many glows of light as there were shooters of arrows.

No sooner had the hiss of Chiota left his lips than Frank, Mose and the three Mexicans at once brought their carbines to their shoulders.

"Shoot well in the rear of the points where the arrows leave the foliage, boys!" directed Frio Frank, "and pick your mark according to position in the line."

"Good talk, heap good talk," agreed the Creek chief.

The words were spoken in voices that were hardly audible.

Not until the sounds made by the fire-arrows dropping on the roof reached them did another hiss-signal come from Chiota. Then came the pressing of triggers, and then a line of fire spurts, six in number, burst from the border at the eastern side of the bend.

This was followed by a thunderous report.

The instant the charges exploded, our friends sprung up and ran some distance toward the river, where they again crouched.

The report of the carbines was the signal for a perfect pandemonium.

First, horrible death-hoofs came from the shades high above the roof of the ranch; and then, crashing through branches and vines, fell three braves, the burning reeds clutched in a death grip.

Yells of terror and agony were also heard from the same point, proving that others had been hit by the bullets.

Terrible war-whoops then sounded.

But these had not ceased to echo when another sound was heard, that caused Chiota, Frio Frank and Marker Mose to bound to their feet, carbines clutched, teeth clinched and faces drawn in deepest apprehension.

It was a sound that tore through Frank's heart like a ragged dart of red-hot steel.

It was a cry of dread terror from female lips—from the lips of none other than the angelic, golden-haired Bertie Bancroft.

CHAPTER XV.

AT FIRST SIGHT.

BANDERA BILL, after parting with Frio Frank, with the beautiful and unconscious sister of the lat-

ter in his arms, soon urged his horse into the shades but a short distance below the entrance to the bend.

But he drew rein at the very border of the undergrowth, where it was comparatively light, and gazed into the face of the maiden whom he had rescued from a dreadful fate.

It appeared to Bill that he had known and loved Floss Forbes for a long time—ay, ever since her brother, his prairie pard, had spoken of her beauty and virtues.

From his intimate acquaintance with, and regard for Frank Forbes, and after the glowing descriptions given by the latter of his sister, William Bancroft had believed sincerely that when he should meet that sister, he would love her with his whole heart and soul.

The picture of Floss, as created in his imagination, was so near the original—although far from equaling it in some respects—that the young man had been most joyously amazed.

Love, as he had anticipated, sprung spontaneously into life the moment he had met the pleasing, trustful, and yet agonized gaze of the captive maiden as he dashed from the undergrowth to her rescue.

And after he had held her form in his arms, after having rescued her from the red demons, then he felt an ecstasy heretofore undreamed of—the undying love of a true, noble, and brave heart filling his whole being.

And now that he was for the first time alone with the beautiful girl, her fair head still reclining upon his breast, and her pale but angelic face near his own, he felt that he cared not ever again to see other than her—that henceforth he would enjoy the greatest happiness conceivable, could he but pass his life in striving to make her happy.

But, if she to whom he had thus at sight given his whole heart and soul—if she should not reciprocate that love, life would not be worth the living.

This extravagance of emotion was produced in a great measure by the privation, pain, and agony of soul that he had experienced since his own capture by the Apaches in the Bandera Hills.

Bill did not even press a kiss upon the brow of the unconscious maiden, for he felt that, senseless as she was, this would have been a sacrilegious act.

The young man could hardly repress his tears when he gazed upon that lovely though pallid and horror-stamped face, upon which, however, might be traced a slight expression of relief and trust, born of the last flickering consciousness she had known, when she comprehended the partial success of the rescuers.

But that senseless face reminded Bandera Bill of his duty, and he urged his horse to a point where he knew there was a cow-path, along which he could pass to the river without disturbing the undergrowth to any extent.

This path Bill soon struck and was in a short time at the bank of the Medina, where he with care succeeded in dismounting with his lovely charge, and quickly placed her reclining upon a mossy bank.

Dense thickets, shrouded them from view, except from the river, from which direction no danger was to be apprehended.

Quickly our young friend filled his canteen with the fresh cool water, and returning, bathed the head of the maiden, pouring a tiny stream between her almost colorless lips. To his relief and joy, a low moan escaped her, and she wearily threw up her arms, placing her palms upon her brow.

On the instant Bill raised his fair patient to a more comfortable position.

At this particular spot the silvery moon found its way, and also upon the waters; and as the young Texan had laid aside his sombrero, Floss, when she partially recovered—indeed, only sufficient to open her eyes, and to gaze in a dazed manner at her rescuer—his handsome face was fully revealed to her.

No sight could have recalled the near and terrible past more instantaneously, and Floss Forbes, with a glad cry, sprung to a sitting posture, grasping the hand of her rescuer in both her own.

Still she was speechless.

"Miss Forbes," began the young man, hesitatingly, "I hope you are not feeling very ill after the fearful experience you have had."

"But allow me to relieve your mind at once. Your father and mother, and also your brother Frank, are alive, safe, and I trust will remain so. Frank is now with Chiota, Marker Mose, and three Mexicans, but a short distance from us."

"You are, you must be, William Bancroft, my brother's friend, and you have rescued me from a terrible fate. My eyes and heart tell me the first, my position the last. Is it not so?"

"I am Will Bancroft, though generally known as Bandera Bill," was the young man's reply; "and I am most happy to have been instrumental in rescuing the sister of one whom I hold in the highest regard from those red demons."

"May Heaven bless you!" exclaimed the maiden, fervently. "I owe you more than life, and I know not in what manner I can ever repay you."

She had again clasped his hand, her heart overflowing with gratitude that even now was blended with a much stronger feeling.

"I am more than repaid, Floss—pardon me, Miss Forbes!"

"Please call me Floss!"

"I am far more than paid already," repeated Bandera Bill, raising the hand of the young girl to his lips.

"I have been told so much about you, by Frank, that it really seems to me I must have known you as long a time as I have your brother."

"And he has frequently spoken of you. I have often heard my father and mother bid Frank bring

you with him to our home—alas, no longer aught but ashes!"

"But we must be thankful that our lives have been spared. Do tell me of your sister! Is she safe?"

"Safe, I trust—secreted in a tree-top near the ranch, and but a little way from here. But I dare not risk the danger of discovery by taking you to her."

The words of Bandera Bill had been tame, but a very volcano of love was seething in his breast; and this was made plain by his burning glance, his very soul being in his eyes, as he gazed into the orbs of Floss, who could not but be greatly influenced by his evident emotion.

Her hands remained clasping his, and slowly his arm stole around her waist.

And she? Her strength, as well as her color, returned, and she felt drawn to her preserver by an almost ungovernable influence.

There was a magnetism, a fascination, in the gaze of Will Bancroft, which the fair maiden could not, and cared not to resist; and, before the arm of the young man pressed her forward to his embrace, she had impulsively clasped her arms about his neck.

Will's head sunk forward, his face within her wavy hair.

Not a word was spoken. Words would have marred the ecstatic happiness of that blissful moment.

Bandera Bill was the happiest of men, and Florence Forbes was the happiest of maidens.

Both had experienced the happiness of an emotion heretofore undreamed of. It seemed to each, that they had been transported to a new, and bright, and most beautiful world.

And neither of them cared to speak. Even the dangers, that still surrounded them, were for the time forgotten.

Each knew that they were with the other, and each loved the other more than self.

That was sufficient.

Thus they remained, enjoying a dream so heavenly that earth for the time, was forgotten. Earth, and friends, and dangers, were banished to the depths of oblivion.

But, they were destined to be awakened, and to have the dread dangers and horrors so near them, recalled to them in a most startling manner.

This was by the terrific discharge of the six carbines, as the fire-arrow shooters became targets for the party in the thicket.

More closely did Bill press Floss to his breast; for he knew that he could be of no assistance in the fight—knew that, to venture forth with the young girl, would be to place her in the greatest peril.

She clung wildly to him, as the whoops of war rung, and sounded in roaring echoes, through the timber.

Then came the shriek, that had caused such excitement and dismay in the line of lurkers on the border of the bend; especially in the soul of Frio Frank. Bandera Bill no sooner heard it, than he cried out:

"Merciful Heaven! That's Bertie—she has been discovered, and is doomed! When, oh! when will this terrible strain end?"

"It is, indeed, too horrible," said Floss. "Will, do go and endeavor to rescue your sister. I must not keep you from her."

"I will be brave, and remain here until you return. Go, I repeat, and at once! I will pray for your life and success, until you return to me."

"Heaven bless you!" returned the young man; "you are noble, brave, and true! Such prayers as yours must be heard."

"But, hear me, before I leave you; for I may be slain. I love you most devotedly, most sincerely! Will you not comfort me with the same sweet words? It will strengthen me to meet what I must brave to rescue my sister, Dancing Fawn, Auntie Sue, and little Romeo."

"If it were not that Frank, with Chiota, Mose, and the three Mexicans were near the tree in which Bertie is seated, I should feel like blowing out my brains!"

"You forget that I still live, Will Bancroft, or you would not speak thus. Do you not know, Will, that your death would either kill me, or plunge me into the deepest despair while life was left to me?"

"Will, I love you! I owe you my life, and that life, and my undying love are yours! Will you not remember that?"

"I shall forget nothing, Floss, my darling, my new-found destiny. But, good-by! This, I hope, will be the last attack we shall ever experience from those savages."

"Heaven bless you for what you have said! Here is one of my revolvers—take the weapon, and defend yourself, should any of the red fiends come this way, which I hope and pray they may not. Keep beside my horse; you can mount him, and speed down the river, if you hear the approach of any of our enemies."

"The crisis, I feel, approaches. Either the last of Lone Wolf's force are to be defeated and scattered, or we are all doomed to death, or worse. Once more, good-by!"

Folding the maiden in his arms, Bandera Bill pressed kisses upon her brow, and cheek, and lips. Then he tore himself from her, and rushed, revolver and bowie in hand, through the shades, and up the river.

The words he had spoken to Floss, were rapidly delivered, and with great expression.

His soul was in his eyes as he spoke, his handsome and proudly-poised form and face greatly impressing, even at that dread moment, the maiden whom he had rescued, only to become a captive to himself.

But, when Bandera Bill had gone, a great change came over the fair girl.

Her form became erect, and she stood proudly defiant clutching tightly the revolver of her lover.

This was but for a moment.

Then she stepped up beside the noble steed of the young Texan, and wound her arms about the animal's neck. The horse rubbed his muzzle against her shoulder, as it pawed the leafy carpet; seeming thus to manifest a desire for the maiden to mount and away.

And mount she did, sitting the saddle with that same determined air and look, while she gazed up the river, listening intently.

Every indication of fear, or concern for self, seemed to have been banished; to be replaced by an anxiety and apprehension for Will Bancroft, to which every other feeling was now subordinate.

Her love had changed her from a weak and helpless girl, to a brave and defiant woman—eager to battle for him, who had battle for her, and hers!

CHAPTER XVI.

EQUAL TO THE EMERGENCY.

WHEN the report of the rifle rung through the dense woods, the slumbers of those in the tree were stirred; and Chunk started as if one of the bullets had pierced him, growing in a low and continuous manner.

The Creek squaw, however, did not see fit to awaken the other occupants of the "nest."

She hushed the dog, gripped her carbine, and listened to the sounds she could so well interpret.

Dancing Fawn was satisfied that stirring scenes must have transpired at the ranch.

Then came the war-whoops of the Apaches, so near that Bertie Bancroft sprung up, with a piercing shriek.

From that moment, Dancing Fawn knew that did not the defenders come at once from their covert, all was lost—that the cry of her white sister had betrayed to the savages the fact that the females were secreted in the timber near them.

Poor Bertie stared around her. Auntie Sue and Romeo also sprung upward, but the young squaw clapped her hands over their mouths to prevent their outcries. She then at once warned the old ranchero, the moment he opened his eyes.

"What have I done?" exclaimed the maiden. "Have I endangered our lives? I knew not where I was, nor what had happened!"

The horrible war-whoops, some so near, proved plainly the fearful consequences that would probably be occasioned by the startled shriek so involuntarily uttered.

Old Ben Bancroft was in a terrible state of mind, and said to his daughter, who now clung to him:

"For God's sake, Bertie, leave me free to act, or we are lost! Romeo, take a rifle, and again show you have good stuff in you. Dancing Fawn, signal Chiota and my son. If they do not come to our assistance, we shall be hacked to pieces!"

The ranchero was instantly obeyed in everything. Nerved by the words of his master, and filled with pride and pleasure at hearing his former heroism referred to, Romeo seized a carbine, and sprung as ride one of the huge branches.

Soon a single, peculiar yell shot through the timber.

Dancing Fawn well knew its meaning. It proceeded from Lone Wolf, and was the signal for his braves to rally.

It came from the vicinity of the very tree in which they were secreted, and toward which Chiota, Frank, Mose, and the Mexicans were making their way quickly.

The crisis had, indeed, arrived. The fate of all depended upon a few moments of time.

And come it did, even before the defenders could reach the tree; for the keen-eyed Dancing Fawn perceived a painted face in a bar of moonlight, and but a few yards from the "nest," and nearly on a level with it.

Instantly the squaw took aim, and pulled trigger. With a horrible death-howl, the Apache fell, crashing through the limbs, and knocking another brave from his hold; both striking the earth together.

The next moment, two other reports from carbines rung, one closely following the other. These were fired by the ranchero, and Romeo.

Down fell two more braves, with blood-curdling howls of death.

This caused the Apaches to become perfectly frenzied. They rushed toward the tree, without further concealment, and another fell by the skillful aim of Dancing Fawn.

As the warriors on the ground rushed to the trunk of the huge tree, again that thunderous report sounded, of six carbines fired as one; spurts of flame bursting from the undergrowth near at hand.

Before the echoes had died away, the Creek chief, followed by Frio Frank, Marker Mose, and the three Mexicans, rushed from the bushes, casting aside their carbines, and jerking their bowie-knives. Then the war-cry of Chiota shot clear through the air.

All of the Apaches, who had not been too badly wounded, or slain outright sprung into the branches of the tree, while the avengers sprung madly after them.

The scene that followed was simply indescribable. In the midst of it all rung the yell of Bandera Bill, as he arrived at the scene of conflict and darted madly up the tree also.

The rush upon the "nest" had been made by a half-dozen braves under Lone Wolf, the leader leading his warriors as fast forward as it was possible in climbing along the limbs. But three more of the reds fell before the carbines of those in the tree, before the Apaches reached the "nest."

Then, hurling their carbines at the on-coming paint daubed demons, the trio that had fired their last shot drew their knives.

Dancing Fawn gave the signal of close danger to Chiota, and he tore upward toward his squaw, as did also Frio Frank and Bandera Bill.

The screams of Auntie Sue were simply unearthly; but the other three crouched, knife in hand, to defend themselves and Bertie. Like a panther, however, the Apache chief sprung forward, felling old man Bancroft by a blow from his hatchet. Auntie Sue met the same fate; and then clutching Bertie who had fainted, Lone Wolf shot forward along a huge branch that interlocked with another from a neighboring tree and disappeared. Dancing Fawn and Romeo remained, striving to defend their lives.

Both, however, were felled by blows from the tomahawks of the Apaches, and fell back into the "nest," with the ranchero and Auntie Sue.

The two braves were prevented, however, from finishing their bloody work; the bowies of Chiota and Frank being buried in their breasts.

"Bertie, she's gone. Lone Wolf got Bertie. It is bad. Must save. Come!"

Thus cried out the Creek chief, as he sprung downward.

Not an Indian, except the dead and wounded, were now to be seen.

Marker Mose and the three Mexicans lay dead amid the corpses and the dying.

Chiota was not within view.

Bandera Bill and Frio Frank stared at each other in silence.

Just then there came a shriek from down the river—the cry of a female in deadly terror!

This was followed by a revolver shot.

"Floss, too!" exclaimed Frank. "On, on to the rescue!"

Bill had all the spirit and strength displayed by his people.

A gleam of hope shot through his mind, and both tore toward the horses; realizing, even then, that the captors of the maidens would make a dash for the mustangs and then speed on the open plain toward the west and up the Medina.

But, to return to Floss Forbes.

The daring girl had decided to advance and aid in driving off the Apaches; but as she urged the horse of Bandera Bill forward and the sounds of the conflict increased, she concluded that she might cause more harm than good, as she would probably detract the attention of the defenders from those who were in such peril to herself.

She therefore halted in a clear space by the bank of the river.

She had been there but a very short time, when the very blood in her veins seemed as ice, and horror took possession of her whole being; for, from the undergrowth directly in front of her, darted the most hideous and fiendish-looking Indian imaginable.

One side of his face was daubed with paint, the other having upon it from temple to mouth, a loathsome and livid scar; while, upon his broad breast, in pigment, was a fair representation of a wolf, with fangs and lolling red tongue extended!

Long black hair, decorated with silver ornaments, a braided fillet with three eagle-feathers flaunting therefrom, buckskin leggings and moccasins—such he appeared.

While flashings, murderous, snake-like eyes, that glared with gloating exultation, completed the diabolical picture.

All this Floss saw, and then her eyes rested upon a golden haired maiden, who hung, limp and senseless, over the arm of the demon savage.

The gaze of Floss Forbes became fixed.

All was plain.

Lone Wolf, the Apache chief, was before her, with Bertie, Bandera Bill's sister, in his vile embrace!

Then it was, that the shriek burst from Floss Forbes, and she raised her revolver to shoot; but the Apache chief, with a grunt of derision, held the captive girl as a shield before him, and sprung forward. The finger of Floss pressed the trigger unconsciously, and the bullet penetrated the foot of the savage fiend.

With a yell of agony and fury, Lone Wolf sprung astride of the horse of Bandera Bill, behind the horror-stricken Floss and still holding Bertie with his left hand, while he clutched the bridle with his right.

The demon speedily worked himself into the saddle, when, placing Bertie and Floss before him like sacks of corn, he jabbed the animal with his knife, and sped toward the open plain.

Triumph was stamped upon his hideous face, and gloating in his eye, as he gazed down into the faces of the two maidens—sisters of those he so hated, Bandera Bill and Frio Frank!

Had he but succeeded in capturing Dancing Fawn also, his cup would have been full, or, at least, he would have to a certain extent avenged the defeats, the death and destruction of his war-party—all of which had been brought about through that terrible trio, the two young scouts, and Chiota, the Creek.

CHAPTER XVII.

ROMEO TO THE RESCUE.

LITTLE Romeo had received but a slight blow, in the haste made by Lone Wolf to secure Bertie; the Apache chief having, at a glance, decided that she must be either the sister or squaw of Bandera Bill.

The young negro revived quickly, and then perceiving that his young mistress had been carried away by the terrible Indians, he became almost frantic with grief. He saw that his mother, as well as Dancing Fawn and his old master, were but stunned, and would soon recover.

They needed not any attention from him.

The whole nature of the black boy had become changed. He had come to the front a hero, upon two occasions of late, as detailed in a previous number. He therefore made little hesitation now.

Nearly wild with grief and anxiety, the lad, with Chunk at his heels, ran through the timber in so confused a state that he lost his bearings and wandered east from the ranch.

Romeo had a very reasonable idea that the Apaches who survived would dash for the open plain, and hasten as fast as mustangs could carry them back on their trail west, fearing entire annihilation. Hence he had striven to reach a point from which he could look out upon the plain.

But, coming bewildered, the boy climbed a tree in order to ascertain in what direction the plain was.

Hardly secure in the lower branches, however, was Romeo, when he heard a movement among the bushes, and then the tramp of a horse on a hard trodden cow-path.

Chunk had slunk into a thicket, to await his master's return from the tree.

The boy stopped climbing, and remained silent. Then, in a moment, he was horrified by the appearance of a most hideous Apache, who held before him on the saddle-horn—as the carcass of fawns might be carried—none other than the beautiful Miss Bertie, and another young lady, both of whom were senseless.

The horse was the animal of his young master, Bandera Bill.

Romeo resolved to brave death to rescue the maidens, although there seemed not the slightest chance for a boy like him to do so.

Did the savage escape with his fair captives—Romeo had made up his mind that the strange young lady must be Frio Frank's sister—then the families of both would be plunged into hopeless misery.

Perhaps he could prevent all this.

He resolved to stake his life in the attempt.

A bright idea was born of his position in the tree, and Romeo made ready to carry out a plan that promised success.

He drew his knife, and waited.

Nearer came the Apache chief with his intended victims.

Nearer still he came, until directly beneath the limb where stood Romeo.

Then down shot the negro lad like a projectile from a catapult—his legs outspread, and one passing on each side of the head of the savage chief.

As he thus caught him about the neck, Romeo threw himself over the right shoulder of the Indian, clutching his right arm.

Then, with all his strength, he wound his small arms around and fastened his teeth in the muscles of Lone Wolf's wrist.

This was done while the Apache chief hung over the side of the horse, forced thus by the weight upon his shoulders and the lunge of Romeo to the right to clutch his wrist. The next instant Lone Wolf was writhing upon the ground, the most amazed and enraged Indian imaginable—Chunk, at a signal from his little master, springing with fury from the thicket, and fastening his fangs in the left hand of the no little terrified Apache.

The affrighted horse bounded forward into the thickets, but maidens slipping from the saddle to the ground nearly side by side.

Seeing the Indian now prevented from helping himself, Romeo sent out yell upon yell; and then, releasing his knife hand, he jabbed the hand of Lone Wolf until the blade of the latter dropped from his grasp.

This the boy clutched, and flung into the thicket.

The contentions of Lone Wolf were now terrible, and caused his little antagonist great torture. Over and over rolled the Indian, the negro lad, and the dog; yet the last mentioned two loosened not their grip until Romeo, entirely exhausted, suddenly let go. He then bounded toward the point where he felt assured he would find the two maidens, still yelling at the top of his lungs, and whistling Chunk to his side.

Loud yells now resounded from the direction of the bend—yells of cheer—and the crashing of bushes followed, as steeds were heard galloping forward.

Lone Wolf stopped to listen for an instant. Then he bounded toward the river, and plunging in, swam to the opposite side. Once there, he gave a rallying yell, and struck up-stream, into the dark shades—never again to "buck" against the "bad medicine" of the Rio Medina.

When Chiota, Frio Frank and Bandera Bill urged their horses to the point where the last scene in the concluding act of our tragic drama took place, guided to it by the yells of Romeo, they were—we may be well assured—greatly gladdened at the picture presented to their view.

There upon the sward sat Bertie and Floss, each clasping one of the little black hands of Romeo, down whose ebony cheeks rolled tears of joy, while Chunk sat at their feet, wagging his tail, his jaws red with the blood of Lone Wolf, the Apache marauder and murderer!

Few words have we to say in conclusion, gentle reader; for words could not describe the relief, joy, and heavenly happiness, that followed close after the scenes of terror and deeds of blood, which we have striven, as truthfully as possible, to record.

Marker Mose and the three Mexicans were buried, with great grief and every honor, beneath the bottom-timber.

Bancroft Ranch was not doomed, after all. It did not burn, as the shingles were wet, from the heavy dew.

Consequently, one home of the two was saved;

and Mr. and Mrs. Forbes were brought to the bend, there to remain until another dwelling was erected for them, by the help of the rancheros of Castrovilla. These kindly offered all the services that could be required, to place both ranches on their former footing.

Old Ben Bancroft, Auntie Sue, and Dancing Fawn were soon restored to consciousness, and their bruised heads attended to. Their joy was beyond expression, when they found that Bertie was safe; and there was no prouder mother in Texas than old Auntie Sue, upon learning that Romeo, with the help of Chunk, had rescued the young ladies from a terrible fate—even from the clutch of Lone Wolf.

As a matter of course, Romeo became one of the heroes of the Medina—little black slave though he was—and, ever after, he was furnished with as much clothing as he could well turn off while engaged in his favorite pastime of hunting coons and opossums; besides being presented with a fine rifle, revolver, and knife, with a belt to match the same.

Chunk, too, seemed always afterward to look with contempt upon the other boys, saying, as he did, in a silver collar with a solid gold clasp.

It was just three months after the scenes which we have in this series recorded that there was a double wedding at Bancroft Ranch, the ceremony being performed beneath the grand old moss-draped tree in which was the "nest" that had twice been the living-place—though it proved so insecure a one—to the females at the ranch.

Old Ben Bancroft, with Mr. and Mrs. Forbes, were most happy indeed to witness the ceremonies that thus united the two families, the marriage of Floss Forbes to William Bancroft, or Bandera Bill, and that of Bertie Bancroft, the golden-haired little of the Rio Medina, to Frank Forbes, better known as Frio Frank.

And, near at hand during this imposing double ceremony, although the rancheros, with their wives and sons, and daughters, from "all around," were present, there were no more impressive or handsome a couple among the guests than carried here and heroine.

There beneath the swaying festoons of moss, his eagle plumes mingling with the same, his head proudly poised and his arms folded across his breast—straight as a lance shaft in all his variegated, war-gear, and scalp decorations—by the side of his gayly bedecked squaw, Dancing Fawn stood the bronzed prince of the prairies, Chiota, the Creek.

An extensive barbecue followed the ceremony, whole oxen, sheep, deer and beef being roasted; and the type of our Creek fields was pitched in the bend, where they remained long, as the honored guests and friends of those whom they had so bravely risked their lives to save.

Never did two landowner couples stand side by side, or a quartette who were so devotedly loved each other, than Bill and Frank with their brides; and a family council, ere the wedding-day was over, ended in an agreement with Mr. and Mrs. Forbes and their son, that they should remove from the Rio to the Medina—two new buildings to be erected in the bend, Bill and Floss deciding that they would remain with the father of the former in Bancroft Ranch.

Thus, for mutual protection against possible further dangers from marauding bands, whether of Indians or of Mexican bandits from the Rio Grande, it was decided that the two families unite forces.

We leave our friends there, with the brightest prospects before them; after they had, all of them, been almost miraculously saved, on several occasions, from the most dreadful deaths.

Chiota departed, after a merry moon with his wife and friends, Dancing Fawn accompanying him, on a trail for revenge on the hated Apaches; and, perhaps, in the near future, we may give in detail some of the adventures and daring exploits of the wandering pair, Dancing Fawn and

CHIOTA, THE CREEK.

THE END.

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